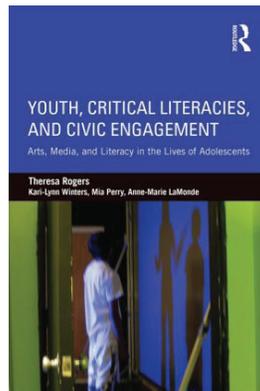

Democracy & Education

When Theory Doesn't Necessarily Meet Practice A Book Review of *Youth, Critical Literacies, and Civic Engagement: Arts, Media and Literacy in the Lives of Adolescents*

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Introduction

In the era of high-stakes testing, arts and arts education in U.S. public education have fared poorly (President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2011). If schools want to have arts programs, increasingly they have to recruit private revenue to support their efforts (Fang, 2013). The Common Core has no reference to arts education (College Board, 2012), and arts education has fallen further and further out of any conversations about the future of public education, despite a growing body of evidence pointing to the benefits of the arts to at-risk youth and the most vulnerable populations in schools (Art Works, 2012). The same might be said for civics, once one of the cornerstones behind the purpose of providing public education for all its citizens. (Labaree, 1997). While most U.S. schools have a civics requirement and most high school students take a civics class, fewer than 25% achieve a proficient score on the NAEP Civics Assessment, and that number shrinks dramatically when looking at low-income and minority students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Given the huge shadow standardized testing casts over the curriculum, it is fair to say that a commitment to educating young people to be

active participants in our democracy is not high on the list of priorities and standards of today's educational leaders.

In *Youth, Critical Literacies, and Civic Engagement: Arts, Media and Literacy in the Lives of Adolescents* (2014), Rogers and her colleagues at University of British Columbia attempted to bring the conversation about the arts and civic engagement back into focus. The authors stated that their work explores "the ways adolescents and young adults from diverse urban settings in Vancouver, Canada, use writing, visual arts, and theater to make critical claims about their everyday lived experiences" (Rogers, Winters, Perry, & LaMonde, 2014, p. 1). Their research occurred around the time that the city of Vancouver was preparing to host the Winter Olympics, with the changes to the urban landscape that accompany such an event. They go on to add that their descriptions

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and analysis delved into how these youth contributed “to the larger ongoing projects of collective democratic life and social justice” (p. 1). In my view, they made a stronger case on the former than the latter.

The heart of the book is chapters about the three research sites where the authors spent a year or more working with youth who employed different types of arts: writing and publishing, filmmaking, and theater performance. The book concludes with a discussion of how and where this youth critical literacy work in the arts is situated in a global city, Vancouver, Canada, and ultimately their implications for changes in public education pedagogy.

The authors defined *citizenship* as “the relationship between a nation’s legal control and the presumption that its citizens should have some limited autonomy in terms of control over their own lives and bodies that their nation supposedly protects” (Rogers, Winters, Perry & LaMonde, 2014, p.2). They went on to link the resistance of youth expressed through their art and their critical literacies, in the Freirian sense of “reading the word and the world,” (Freire, 1970, p. 2) to efforts to imagine new possibilities for public engagement. While such a construct sounds noble and inspirational on a theoretical level, it also lacks a sense of agency in their examples of civic engagement. This theme is repeated throughout their analysis of the production at each research site and is a limitation of the book’s conclusions. The engagement part of civic engagement involves more than consciousness raising but includes active participation, risk taking, and dialogue with policymakers and decisionmakers, more so than their definition allows (Gingold, 2013) and their data supports.

The first research site was a center that drew a community of street and homeless young people together to socialize, receive meals, and write and produce a zine, a small-circulation magazine that allowed their voices to be heard about a number of personal and social issues affecting them. The second site was a center that housed a national program for youth affected by violence. These youth used filmmaking as a medium to express their experiences, feelings, and concerns. The third site was a high school where a ninth-grade theater class used drama and performance art as the medium to explore issues associated with their own bodies and identities and their relationships to the larger world. While only briefly referenced, almost no details are supplied concerning how and why these sites were chosen for study.

Methodology

The level of transparency the authors brought to presenting their methodology was admirable. They described not only their approach to data collection and analysis but where it was constrained. For example, the team that worked with the homeless and street youth were originally invited to help offer some computer literacy skills but found that the youth were wary about their presence. Adults had arranged the original entry, and once the researchers were there, the youth demanded to renegotiate the researchers’ entry for themselves. This included sharing their discomfort with typical research practices of videotaping and even taking field notes. The team honored their concerns, limiting themselves to “jottings” (Rogers, Winters, Perry & LaMonde, 2014,

p.30) while in their presence, and only later transferred those jottings into full-blown field notes. Additionally, the standard method for obtaining informed consent via parent/guardian signatures was untenable with this population. The team instead went through an ethics board to allow youth over 16 to sign for themselves. At the high school site, the researchers also acknowledged that their dynamic presence as participant-observers in the classroom directly impacted the realities of their enterprise.

In their appendix, the authors further detailed their methodological approaches. It lays out their framework and provides additional and substantial insight into the creative working of each group of youth participants. Organized around the themes of preparation, inquiry, reflection, and development, the book describes each site’s approach to these themes, along with concrete examples of them. This added to an understanding of the work. According to the appendix, considerably more work was produced and disseminated by the youth than was illustrated in each chapter.

Shouting from the Streets: Youth, Homelessness, and Zining Practices

This first site appeared to be the most challenging in which to gain and build trust. The transient nature of street youth injected its own variable of uncertainty about whom or how many might show up on any given day and what they would wish to work on. In comparison with the other two sites, it also seemed that these youth were less interested in the skills the researchers had to offer. They accepted the food they provided and some of the creative tools (e.g., disposable cameras) they shared, but there was little sense of any relationships that developed. Examples of the art produced include a poster decrying the behavior of drug users whose actions endanger children and other citizens. Several poems were written that addressed the gap between those with material comforts and ease and the lives of street youth. One zine was built around tattoo art and another focused on advice for social workers.

The chapter is richer theoretically than empirically. This may have been a by-product of the data-collection obstacles. The authors introduced the reader to Jordan, the 24-year-old “train hopper” (Rogers, Winters, Perry & LaMonde, 2014, p.21) with strong opinions, who quickly produced his poem-poster about the aforementioned careless rig disposal, recruited a friend to draw a picture of a syringe, and inserted a photo of himself with a dog as his contribution to the zine and seemed disinterested in working any further. His message was that people needed to use the public boxes for safe disposal of needles and not leave them around schools or playgrounds. The quality of his work struck me as a little facile in spite of his avowed personal history with street zines in Vancouver and elsewhere and the value he said they held for him and others. I wonder what Jordan would have made of the authors’ following analysis of his art:

Looking back at all of the examples above it is clear that by appropriating traditional discourses, hybridizing genres and forms,

and using parody or irony, the youth were talking back to or disrupting “repetitive citations” about street youth that disempowered them, and thereby repositioning themselves in relation to their audience. (Rogers et al., 2014, p.38)

Such an analysis is fine as it stands, but it calls into question what kind of effort was made to do a member check with the youth, and further, whether any of the youth read this manuscript and had thoughts on how their lives and work were ultimately portrayed. For this particular population, who openly expressed their distrust and guardedness with the presence of researchers and research practices in the first place, I wonder how a more transparent practice of sharing iterative analyses might have colored and informed the shape of the text. This was one of my struggles with this book overall, that the theoretical analyses seemed to ascribe more than perhaps the empirical data supported.

Leaving Out Violence: Talking Back to the Community through Film

Here the authors reported on a group of youth who are part of a community center that offered a national antiviolence program, LOVE (Leave Out Violence). Many of the youth were victims and/or had people close to them victimized. The program also helped to develop young leaders. The researchers seemed to connect well with these youth, and the youth were open to learning various techniques of filmmaking, all leading to their creating or imagining several individual short films as well as producing a group film. The fluency with which these youth related to film and music suggests strongly that as media film and music have become what makes up the youth literary canon more than the printed word. There is no real discussion of the leadership component to the program, so another example of where the agency associated with their practice of critical literacy is hard to discern.

The flow between the analytic vignette and its interpretations and implications is stronger and clearer than that of the previous chapter. It might have something to do with there being considerably more empirical data presented. However, there is still the gnawing problem of theoretical overreach when describing one of these teen films as presenting “a range of discursive and cultural resources to engage in or talk back to dominant cultural narratives about her life and world” (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 71). That young filmmaker may very well be talking and stating such claims, but there is no evidence of who is actually listening. In this chapter, the authors characterize as “complex” these youth’s civic engagement, calling it “more than local but less than global” (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 79). Once again, the empirical data does not seem to support it.

Performing Adolescence: Staging Bodies in Motion

Their final research site was a school setting, and beyond identification as located in a middle-class neighborhood, no details are offered about the school. The fact that it offers a sophisticated theater class for ninth graders leads one to think that it might have been a private school. Like the youth filmmakers, these students seemed quite open to receiving instruction in specific techniques

and skills, in this case writing and producing performance pieces of “devised theater” (i.e., self-created). I appreciate the authors’ admission that their facilitation and overall presence had a real effect over the social, political, cultural, and interpersonal contexts of the site. This chapter blends the qualitative and theoretical in an overall representation of what these youth did, experienced, and the larger social implications. However, here too the authors engaged in the occasional theoretical embellishment. For example, their description of a devised dialogue in a clinic where one girl played the role of a tattoo artist and the other an artist with a few tattoos of her own reads as:

Roxy: I saw your sketches. What do you do?

Lexa: Actually, I sculpt. You?

Roxy: I’m a tattoo artist.

Lexa: Oh, cool, I have a couple of tats myself. What are you in for?
(Rogers et al., 2014, p. TK)

The immediate analysis of the scene makes one wonder the degree to which these girls might see themselves in this critique: “The tattooed body here was set against the body as a subject of testing, offering a counterpoint or counter discourse to the medicalizing and surveillance discourse of the female body in the majority of the scene” (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 92). Perhaps it is a minor point, however, I think especially when conducting research with youth and other vulnerable populations, researchers should go the extra distance to ensure that their analyses resonate with those who provided them with the data and to discuss how their analyses are situated into their lived lives. The authors claimed that “in addressing publics, these productions teach specific ideas about young people to their audiences that can be understood as a form of citizenship” (Rogers et al., 2014, p.108). As in the previous two chapters, to cast the youth’s art as somehow representative of civic engagement is a bit of stretch.

Youth Claims in a Global Context: Texts, Discourses, and Spaces of Youth Literacies

The authors summed up their research by stating that the youth they worked with “demonstrated that they are sophisticated critical and cultural theorists and important and vocal participants in local and global conversations about contemporary social issues, collective democratic life and social justice” (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 99). A poster about the careless disposal of needles, a film about teenage stereotypes and an imagined film about a city undergoing radical gentrification, a devised theater performance set in women’s clinic and for a school audience—it is clear that these youth had important things to say and that there might be some larger potential for impact from their artistic expressions. However, I don’t think that their work rose to that level of consequence. This is not to negate the messages created and communicated or the sincerity behind them.

The authors chose to link these youth’s work with theoretical positions of counter resistance and their implications toward the larger society rather than with actual efforts in either North America or worldwide by youth succeeding in making social change via their

art and civic behaviors. The efforts to reform the prison industrial complex via the work and art from Chuco's Justice Center in Los Angeles (Owen Driggs, 2014); the Mikva Challenge and its mission to develop the next generation of civic leaders (www.mikvachallenge.org); Louder Than A Bomb, the largest annual poetry slam; and any number of arts activism projects published by the website WhatKidsCanDo.com are just a few examples of youth using their critical literacies and public art skills to realize success in changing policies around how adults in power view youth and their contribution to society. Perhaps it is my own bias toward participatory action research with youth, however, that says linking their work in solidarity with youth artists/activists around the world might have been a stronger way to elevate their work.

Alternately, throughout this book, the appropriating of the language of critical theory, of "radical pedagogical possibilities" (Anyon, 2014), and the positioning of "public bodies against corporate power, [to] connect classrooms to the challenges faced by social movements in the streets and provide spaces within classrooms for personal injury and private terrors to be translated into public considerations and struggles" (Giroux, 2005, p. 10) served as injections of rhetorical steroids onto a data set and an empirical body that didn't really support the additional heft and scope. I find this somewhat endemic in certain educational research. I say this as someone who appreciates that kind of theorizing and wants to believe in the revolutionary implications researchers advance. Still, such references move further away from the data and closer to pushing an agenda that is not as well substantiated by the facts on the ground. This point is also reflected at the end of this chapter, when the authors introduced a section on implications from these sorts of youth critical literacies on the curricula in school—they also did not acknowledge that there were pedagogies and practices already in place doing the work they posited (Morell, Dueñas, García, & López, 2013). Again, I very much agree with their sentiment, but there was so little actual reference from the perspective of these youth as to make the section feel more than a little added on.

The authors made some effort to modulate their critique away from these larger theoretical claims. They stated that "whether or not youth view their work as civic engagement or resistance work, we need to understand the gray areas between their actions, intentions and the social implications of their work" (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 112). Later they added that the possibility exists that these youth

will find meaning as their public pedagogies and civic engagement, often momentary and partial and at times more sustained and committed, unfold in time and in the context of institutional histories, urban contexts, and particular nation-states, and also in retrospect; that youth resistance and engagements can be viewed as continually

contingent rather than fixed. (Rogers et al., 2014, p. 112)

I wish there had been more of that kind of measured critique.

Youth, Critical Literacies, and Civic Engagement is an interesting read. However, I do not feel it breaks new ground either theoretically or in its examples of youth art as political and social critique. Nevertheless, it is highly thoughtful, and the authors believe strongly about the role that youth can and do play to bring to light critical issues and observations about society, making their voices and concerns heard. Perhaps in doing so, they will become more active participants in civil society, and in the process, teach adults a thing or two.

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