

Reaching: Community-Engagement as Education for Youth Aspiration and Well-being

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Introduction

This article is about the youth acting subject within an afterschool media production organization. It is based on over three years of ethnographic fieldwork with participants 14-24 years old (5-15 participated at any given time), in California's Central Valley, an agro-industrial region. Since people design projects and practice them intentionally (Ortner 2006), this study examines how agency and development work with youth-driven media projects. Youth use tacit awareness to stimulate action and complete projects based on values not fully represented in popular media. They refuse division and placation as they seek to improve conditions (Kennelly 2011). This dynamic demonstrates that power relations are not wholly structural but also contextual, as people perceive and enter spaces and then take united action.

What educational activities support youth aspiration and community transformation? My proposition is simple: don't think – act. Below, I argue that public action supports youth social-emotional well-being and aspirational growth, while redressing humanity's shift away from interdependence (Critchley 2007). Young people benefit from community-engaged activities. Public action helps youth fit into social structures while improving relationships across differences. My goal is to highlight community actions that support youth well-being and build interactive capacity toward humanity for all. Action is also reaching and is tied to aspiration to the extent that youth gain opportunities to participate in local cultural production.

Problem Statement and Rationale

This project is readily concerned that dominant discourses from corporate media can sideline our deepest human truths. Young people experience contradictions with these broad images and struggle to see the big picture. Also, schooling may not match up with young people's hopes and dreams. Annette Laureau (2003) noticed socioeconomic cultural differences yet identified that affluent and working-class children experienced similar realities with school. Elsa Davidson (2011) saw that children comport away from their truths to fit certain modes of learning. Kim Case's (2016) pedagogical take on disidentification relates to the findings of both Davidson and Laureau. Young people may devalue desired things because their interests seem out of reach. Effectively, young people claim not to like something because it seems unachievable. As a solution, public action is about reaching to accept the world while forming values in action. With youth journalists, I sought to develop a humanity-for-all mentality toward self, others, and society. They expressed not experiencing this mindset otherwise in the popular media, with its polarizing

effects. One of my roles was to help them see beyond this false dichotomy while promoting a deeper awareness of interdependent humanity.

Methods

Research activities involved twice-a-week meetings, including social-emotional check-ins, journalism topics, and methods training, reviewing current events, and discussing future events and actions. As a participant-observer, I facilitated personal reflections and led journalism workshops on media literacy and critical assessments of events. This was my chance to reach out to them as social actors as they sought to reach out to the community for belonging and support. They desired to be known for their efforts. They asserted their avowed identities, photographed themselves, signed their work, and promoted projects.

The organization's leadership team announced public action opportunities for the youth journalists. As work developed, I came to understand that they were reaching for social inclusion. Reach is a key concept and methodology that emerged. Reach is an inward search for an outward expression to seek self-knowledge and build relationships through action. Reaching attends to self with society toward an interdependent local culture. In a community-engaged philosophical way, conversations across differences helped youth participants achieve unity. Balazs and Morello-Frosch (2013) discuss reaching in the context of community-based participatory research (CBPR) as sharing. They say, "Reach encapsulates the degree to which knowledge is disseminated to diverse audiences and translated into useful tools for the scientific, regulatory, policy and lay arenas" (2). This media group had the lay tools for social change, or as Anthony Giddens (1984) calls it, a practical consciousness for right human action. Their social advancement efforts fostered new bonds with themselves, each other, and the community.

Below I present two examples of reaching that highlight the kinds of media projects completed. These actions supported youth unity at community events and illustrate the positive power of reach.

March for Our Lives

On March 24, 2018, in a youth-led movement for gun control laws, "March for Our Lives" captured millions of hearts across the United States. Locally, a coalition of youth groups and adult allies demanded an end to gun violence in schools. The march evidenced power and contention for attendees. Youth actors read poetry and names and argued for and against gun ownership. The group proclaimed that it was time to stop talking and praying. It was time for action. This endeavor showed that people can have productive dialogues across position differences. For example, when a middle-schooler said schools need more security and metal detectors, audience groans swelled. However, people were most interested in producing an educational opportunity rather than attacking the messenger. People may participate in the same action yet have different plans for moving forward together. Perhaps public action need not be about legal change or argument against

an idea or representative ideal. Rather, action can focus on reaching to form possibilities. Reaching related to hope for interdependent humanity across differences.

Trans and Intersex Rights March

Recent data shows an increase in identifying and/or allying with LGBTQ+ communities (Public Religion Research Institute 2024). I consider myself a member of this group and grapple with how reach works where the action is directed at educating a diverse public. On November 17, 2018, the youth journalists initiated a “Transgender and Intersex Rights” march. Along with peer and adult allies, the media group reached for identity inclusion and resistance to identity silence. They expressed frustration that dominant identity discourses hinder growth and do not reflect human interdependence. LGBTQ+ youth and their allies spoke of invisibility and underrepresentation. Through a discourse of resistance, they reached for better terms of recognition. This effort showed a reach to change meanings of sex, gender, and sexuality that value and validate naming and claiming one’s identity. It illustrated their refusal of discourses that exclude their identity terms.

Conclusion

Community action is education. The actions presented highlight ideas young people are attracted to as amplifiers of cultural change. They showed how people can work together across differences. The youth media group stood for what they believe is true, rather than simply resisting the status quo as they perceived it. Reach works because it is a memorable moment and the chance to imagine future possibilities. Reaching related also to social-emotional well-being because action facilitated entrance into the public square even as they claimed to resist its present state. The significance was less in the outcomes but in doing something – literally, anything – that sought community health improvement. Moreover, action produced inner changes that supported aspirational reach. The youth journalists showed that reaching is about growth toward humanity for all. We may take cues from scholars who have asserted that cultural practice and community engagement are vital to educating children (Clifton 2017; Lancy 2008; Lancy 2017; Longo 2007). As youth grow, their values change, and this sets the stage for more youth actions; growth is ongoing.

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Author Biography

Josh is a recent graduate of the University of California, Merced's Interdisciplinary Humanities doctoral program. He is a scholar of childhood and youth studies interested in highlighting unity across differences as expressed in youth-led community engaged projects. His field combines cultural anthropology and social history with media and communication studies.

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