

BEYOND PUBLICATION

Social action as the ultimate stage of a writing process

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Abstract

This article reports on the activities undertaken in a U. S. high school through which students produced video texts designed to address key social problems. The authors argue against conventional “writing process” models that assert a single set of stages for all writing and that position “publication” as the final stage of “the writing process.” In contrast, they illustrate how teaching grounded in critical literacy theory and informed by principles of connected learning requires instruction in task-specific procedures for interrogating information, imagining alternatives, and taking social action as the ultimate goal of composition. The authors detail one teacher’s instruction and illustrate its effects with examples from students’ work to demonstrate the shortcomings of conventional “writing process” conceptions and offer an alternative that advances the citizenship potential of youth in addressing societal inequities.

Keywords: critical theory, connected learning, social action, writing process, multimodal composing

1

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*"I think that our voices do make a difference, if you put in the time and effort for them to be heard."
9th grade participant in the Letters2Prez 2.0 campaign*

INTRODUCTION

In today's technologically-mediated globalized economy, there is increasing interest in how new digital media are transforming social relationships, economic opportunities, and civic participation. Central to this discussion is how new digital media are changing the nature of communication and writing for young people. Ethnographic studies have highlighted how young people are using digital media to engage in participatory politics and social activism in networked communities such as #BlackLivesMatter, the Harry Potter Alliance, and the DREAMer movement (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligerler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016). It is clear from these examples that many young people are committed to social change and are seeking new avenues for disrupting the status quo. In this article, we focus on how new digital media have transformed the communicative literacy practices for many adolescents and how they have the potential to transform the writing process and writing instruction as traditionally conceptualized in schools.

Drawing on these current technological trends, proponents of connected learning (e.g., Ito et al., 2013) argue for an approach to education that draws on young people's interests and passions to connect them with academic, career, and civic opportunities. Although work on connected learning highlights the potential for new digital media to engage young people in social action, researchers have been quick to acknowledge that "the majority of young people need more supports to translate and connect their new media engagements for academic, civic, and production oriented activities" (Ito et al., 2013, p. 25). Providing scaffolded support around new media in schools is especially important given the "widening chasm between the progressive use of digital media outside of the classroom, and the no-frills offerings of most public schools that educate our most vulnerable populations" (p. 2).

A recent review of literature citing the connected learning framework (Watulak, Woodard, Smith, Johnson, Phillips, & Wargo, 2018) showed that much of the research citing the connected learning framework has taken place in informal and out-of-school settings. These researchers argue for investigations into how teachers in public schools might use principles of connected learning to support equitable teaching and learning. Despite the ubiquity of digital media—generally considered central to the connected learning framework—and their integral role in the lives of many young people, there is surprisingly little research on how students are learning to compose with them in schools (Applebee & Langer, 2011), and how digital composing has changed common conceptions of the writing process.

According to a reference search run through Harzing's Publish or Perish software during our writing of this article, Ito et al.'s (2013) connected learning framework has been cited over 700 times, or roughly 144 times per year, a remarkably high reference rate for a relatively new publication. Only about one percent of references

focused specifically on the teaching of writing in formal classroom settings, which is our concern in this article. Of these studies concerned with writing, only two were tied to issues of civic engagement. Cartun, Penuel, and West-Puckett (2017) examined how redesigning a high school senior capstone project around principles of connected learning helped students bridge their in and out-of-school literacy practices by having them investigate an issue they wanted to learn more about and “share it back with the world ... [through] a website and a series of texts in different formats tied to the project and to compose a research presentation to share their final projects” (p. 185), giving this project a public dimension, without necessarily giving it the civic element of the sort we advocate for in our study. Schmier, Johnson, and Lohnes Watulak (2018) studied how a student within a public high school journalism classroom wrote a critique of one of the school’s physical education teachers and published it both on school hallways and in the newspaper’s online edition, creating a furor that the administration resolved by subordinating the student’s essay to the teacher’s response. The authors concluded that connected learning opportunities may require teachers to help students anticipate response and express and present their views with a social context in mind.

Both of these examples come from specialized environments: a senior capstone project not tied to a specific class, and a journalism class where public reporting is the norm. No studies have situated connected learning related to civic writing in a subject area class, as we do in presenting how connected learning produced civic action in a public high school English class in the Eastern United States. We inquired into how one teacher’s students engaged in civic action through activities predicated on principles of connected learning with the following question:

In the context of a national initiative to provide a forum for student activism, how did one teacher’s students extend their writing process into publicly posted, action-oriented arguments on a social issue about which they were passionate?

We next review theory that frames this investigation in the areas of limits of conventional writing process theory, and possibilities for critical literacy to undergird connected learning in the classroom.

The limitations of writing process theory

“The writing process” has often been presented as a series of stages culminating with “publication.” The following outline typifies this view of writing:

- 1) *Prewriting*: This is the planning phase of the writing process, when students brainstorm, conduct inquiry, gather and outline ideas, often using diagrams for mapping out their thoughts. Audience and purpose should be considered at this point, and for the older students, a working thesis statement needs to be started.
- 2) *Drafting*: Students create their initial composition by writing down all their ideas in an organized way to convey a particular idea or present an argument. Audience and purpose need to be finalized.

- 3) *Revising*: Students review, modify, and reorganize their work by rearranging, adding, or deleting content, and by making the tone, style, and content appropriate for the intended audience. The goal of this phase of the writing process is to improve the draft.
- 4) *Editing*: At this point in the writing process, writers proofread and correct errors in grammar and mechanics, and edit to improve style and clarity. Having another writer's feedback in this stage is helpful.
- 5) *Publishing*: In this last step of the writing process, the final writing is shared with the group. Sharing can be accomplished in a variety of ways, and with the help of computers, it can even be printed or published online. (time4writing, n. d., n. p.)

In writing process models of this sort, the final stage is a writing product that is shared in some fashion, often within, and occasionally beyond the classroom walls. The goal of writing is to produce writing. The finished, "published" text is the last stage in this process.

Despite the seeming ubiquity of this general account of "the writing process," many find it insufficient in writing within specific genres with accepted conventions. In particular, researchers working in the tradition of George Hillocks (e.g., 1986, 1995, 2007; see Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, & McCann, 2010; Smagorinsky & Smith, 1992) have identified limitations in general process models (cf. Schneider, 2003). These teachers and researchers argue instead for a "structured process" approach (Applebee, 1986) in which specific writing tasks—argumentation, classification, personal narrative, etc.—require particular processes that can be taught and that might be quite different from one another in relation to task-specific, genre-driven expectations.

In this paper, we challenge the assumption that "the writing process" always follows a single general set of stages in which publication is the culminating act, and the assumption that a general process serves all writing needs such that task-specific composing knowledge is not necessary. We contest each of these assumptions from a critical perspective that views *social action* as the object of composing when a connected learning framework is invoked pedagogically. If the pen is mightier than the sword, then it ought to produce texts that do more than occupy a page or file. Writing needs to be put into action, beyond the completion and simple sharing of the text.

The critical potential of connected learning

Critical literacy education (Janks, 2000) is informed by sociocultural theories of language (Fairclough, 1992) and emphasizes the importance of understanding the relation among language, power, and identity, important considerations in a connected learning framework centered on student agency. One of the best ways to bring critical literacy into the classroom is to expose students to texts with multiple perspectives and viewpoints so that they can begin to understand how these texts are

constructed by specific individuals with political goals (Comber, 2001).

We borrow from Jones (2006) to introduce a set of critical moves that help the students examine their surroundings with an idea toward positive social change, so as to put their compositions to work in service of a more equitable society. These moves include four sequential dimensions:

- 1) *Gathering information*, the process of inquiry through which citizens learn about a problem in verified detail to take an informed perspective on it.
- 2) *Deconstruction*, which involves breaking down and examining texts and other aspects of the environment that potentially limit opportunities of subgroups historically disenfranchised and objectified by those invested in the power structure. This process includes taking an idea apart to examine its features, processes, impacts, and other components, requiring a close, hard reading of people, places, texts, actions, etc. so that their implications are clearly revealed.
- 3) *Reconstruction*, the process of re-imagining via exploratory thinking, discussion, and writing how the setting could be more equitable and less oppressive to disempowered social groups. This act could be achieved through conversation and the generation of new visions of how things might be.
- 4) *Social action*, that is, working to change the power structure to some degree by working actively and deliberately toward the sorts of goals imagined during the process of reconstruction.

Students in classes taking a critical literacy approach ideally become active, engaged, participants, moving well beyond receiving established knowledge to become constructors of new societal visions. Critical pedagogy is designed to teach students to critique cultural politics in texts they read and thus is committed to the empowerment of culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised learners to create more democratic classrooms (Darder, Boltodano, & Torres, 2009).

The unit we feature in this article synthesized a critical literacy perspective with principles of connected learning (Ito et al., 2013), an approach that “advocates for broadened access to learning that is socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity” (p. 4). This framework includes six learning and design principles: The teaching is interest-powered, involves a shared purpose, is openly-networked, is academically-oriented, involves peer-support, and is centered on production. Rather than publication being the ultimate product, social action serves as the purpose of composition.

The ideals of critical and connected learning perspectives, like most, are easier to state in journal articles and professional books than to create in a real school. Students, teachers, and other stakeholders who often resist critiques of the *status quo* need to agree that their surroundings are neither fixed nor fair, but rather are open to interpretation, critique, and reformation. The report that follows suggests both the potential of a critical approach, and the resistance it may face as particular classrooms are embedded in the larger, often conservative edifice of the U.S. public school.

CONTEXT OF THE INVESTIGATION

The critical project reported here was taught in a ninth-grade humanities class in a town a few hours south of Washington, D.C. The course was designed to provide opportunities for students to imagine a more just world through the creation of a video message addressed to the next U. S. president, thus adding a technological dimension to the notion of a text, one that allows for multiple means of symbolic representation and online distribution. The project took place during the fall 2016 as the U.S. was experiencing one of the most divisive elections in modern history, a process that produced Donald J. Trump as the president.

The teacher of the class, Amanda Clark (a pseudonym), worked collaboratively with two faculty members from the nearby College of William & Mary (coauthors Lindy L. Johnson and Katalin [Kat] Wargo), to provide her students with opportunities to participate in the politically tense and quarrelsome landscape through their video productions, allowing for civic engagement as a means to maintaining a free and democratic society. (Coauthors Jacqueline Chisam and Peter Smagorinsky served in other authorial roles in the production of this study.) More recently, the U.S. student walkout over school shootings has shown the power of youth in protesting broad social forces that produce violence in schools, suggesting that projects of this sort can play a role in inspiring passionate involvement in school activities motivated by critical concerns. These walkouts arose from students' outrage over their feelings of having their security violated, and were undertaken through channels they developed on their own. In the project we report, the teachers provided instruction that taught students procedures for thinking about and acting on pressing social matters affecting their lives.

The project was inspired by the *Letters to the Next President 2.0* campaign (letters2prez.org), an online platform created by the National Writing Project. The goal of the campaign was to empower young people to speak out about issues important to them in the 2016 presidential election (<https://letters2president.org/>). Ultimately 12,836 letters written by young people from around the United States were uploaded to the openly-networked website, with topics including such contentious social issues as gun control (1104 letters), police brutality (526 letters), education (826 letters), and climate change (250 letters). Amanda's student participants in this local instantiation of a national project came from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and represented a wide range of socioeconomic statuses and academic performance records. During the unit students worked collaboratively to inquire into topics that were important to them such as #Black Lives Matter, cyberbullying, immigration, sexual harassment, climate change, and terrorism.

METHOD

Participants

Data collection took place in Amanda's humanities classroom at Lakeview High School (pseudonym), a public high school in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Lakeview High enrolls 1100 students in grades 9-12. Approximately 30% of the students at Lakeview qualify for free or reduced lunch. Lakeview reports student demographic information using the following racial categories: American Indian/Alaskan Native (1%), Asian (2%), Black (20%), Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander (0.1%), Hispanic (7%), White (65%). The demographics of participants in the study mirror Lakeview High School's demographics. All 100 students enrolled in Amanda's humanities classes were invited to participate in the study. Ninety of the students gave informed consent and received parental permission to participate in the study.

Data collection

During the fall of 2016, we adopted ethnographic perspectives using observational and interview methodologies to examine the social practices of the focal teacher and students (Green & Bloome, 2005). We conducted four classroom observations during the course of the inquiry project. During these classroom observations, we also spoke with students about their work and completed detailed field notes. We met with Amanda once a month during the fall semester to discuss the pedagogical decisions Amanda was making and how her students were responding. During these meetings, we took field notes that helped to inform the focus of this article. We also conducted two interviews with Amanda the semester after she taught the unit. These interviews provided a deeper understanding of the instructional activities that Amanda designed and provided insights into how she moved students through a process of critical inquiry.

Data also encompassed student work from the project, including students' written reflections about their experiences. In the following semesters, Lindy conducted semi-structured focus group interviews with twenty of the students. During these interviews, she used a photo-elicitation technique (Harper, 2002) in which she and the focus group of students watched their video messages together. Lindy then stopped the video to ask questions about each scene.

Data analysis

Because of the large corpus of data for this study, we used descriptive field notes and research memos to begin organizing the data into broad categories and then mapped these broad categories onto the connected learning framework. We then examined patterns across the data looking for *crucis* or moments of crisis in the data as an entry point into the analysis (Fairclough, 1992). We focused on one of

Amanda's students, Erika (a pseudonym), given that Erika's story represented a significant moment of crisis in the enactment of this particular classroom project.

In the next section, we begin by describing the ways in which Amanda's instructional techniques mapped onto the connected learning framework. We then document the ways in which incorporating a critical connected learning approach resulted in resistance from the administration. Finally, we argue that providing instruction informed by principles of connected learning and critical literacy can promote civic engagement and social action among students as they extend their writing process beyond publication and into social action.

INTEREST-POWERED INSTRUCTION: BUILDING ON STUDENTS' HISTORIES AND IDENTITIES

Designing English Language Arts instruction oriented toward social justice and equity requires attention to students' histories, identities, and languages, as outlined in standards established by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE Standard VI, 2012; cf. Smagorinsky, 2018, for one such instructional unit). Connected learning potentially helps to provide practical design principles to enact a social justice curriculum. Connected learning becomes possible when "a young person is able to pursue a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults, and is in turn able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career success or civic engagement" (Ito et al., 2013, p. 4). Building on student interests and backgrounds in our unit was essential in multiple ways, grounding their inquiries into critical social problems in their heartfelt concerns over troubling social issues. Beyond personal interests, it further engaged students in inquiries into their surroundings, requiring them to get outside pre-existing assumptions and to inquire into issues that were likely to affect their futures and those of their classmates and fellow citizens.

The instruction also responded to Hillocks' (2007; Smagorinsky et al., 2010; Smagorinsky & Smith, 1992) imperative that writing instruction should be task-specific rather than general. The task taken up by Amanda's class involved two specific types of knowledge about writing. First, consistent with Jones' (2006) gathering information stage, the students needed to read about the problem that they had identified through the emphasis on their personal connections and histories with their social worlds, and locate and organize relevant information to inform their inquiries. This stage requires an understanding of a process for writing research, or inquiry reports (Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, & McCann, 2012). The students were not simply reporting on sources they found, however; they were arguing based on evidence. They thus needed specific attention to the process of persuasion through argumentation (Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, & McCann, 2011) built from the rhetorical appeals of *ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*: ethics, emotion, and logic.

Rather than producing a verbal composition, the students were assigned to work in small groups to produce their arguments in videos to be included on the

Letters2prez online platform. One of the goals of the Letters2prez platform was to take advantage of students' interest in multimodal production and consumption. From a personal connection standpoint, the technology dimension helped create interest and investment in the project among the students. From the perspective of critical theory, in order to have their call for social action taken up by their peers, video texts provided an appropriate way to express their views on a pressing contemporary issue in a medium ideally suited to web-based collections.

THE INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE

The teaching involved a carefully sequenced set of activities designed to move students deliberately through a process of critical inquiry based on personal connections, using a technological platform for persuasive purposes.

"Where I'm From" poem

To enable students to draw on a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults and link it to their inquiries, we began the unit by having the students write "Where I'm From" poems. This form was developed by Lyon (2017), who describes its elements as including attention to a range of possible focuses:

- a *place* could open into a piece of descriptive writing or a scene from memory.
- your *parents' work* could open into a memory of going with them, helping, being in the way. Could be a remembered dialogue between your parents about work. Could be a poem made from a litany of tools they used.
- an important *event* could open into freewriting all the memories of that experience, then writing it as a scene, with description and dialogue. It's also possible to let the description become setting and directions and let the dialogue turn into a play.
- *food* could open into a scene at the table, a character sketch of the person who prepared the food, a litany of different experiences with it, a process essay of how to make it.
- *music* could take you to a scene where the music is playing; could provide you the chance to interleave the words of the song and words you might have said (or a narrative of what you were thinking and feeling at the time the song was first important to you ("Where I'm Singing From").
- *something someone said to you* could open into a scene or a poem which captures that moment; could be what you wanted to say back but never did.
- a significant *object* could open into a sensory exploration of the object-what it felt, sounded, smelled, looked, and tasted like; then where it came from, what happened to it, a memory of your connection with it. Is there a secret or a longing connected with this object? A message? If you could go back to yourself when this object was important to you, what would you ask, tell, or give yourself?

Remember, you are the expert on you. No one else sees the world as you do; no one else has your material to draw on. You don't have to know where to begin. Just start. Let it flow. Trust the work to find its own form. (n. p.; emphasis added)

Note that the beginning of the students' inquiries in this case departs from the sequence detailed by Jones (2006) for a critical pedagogy, in that it is initiated with an exploration of self rather than of surroundings. This synthesis of critical and connected learning pedagogies thus includes a stage of personal exploration designed to encourage students to think about themselves in relation to their social environment. What seems important in including this preliminary stage is making sure that it does not produce reification of prior beliefs, as personal reflection may potentially do (Fendler, 2003). Rather it is designed to help students move from the personal to the social and to recognize the challenges such a transition presents. In this way, the students could take into account not only their own sensitivities and experiences but those of people whose lives are much different.

In our pedagogical adaptation of Lyon's (2017) elements of a "Where I'm From" poem, we posed to students such questions as: What are some items found in your home? What are some sayings that are specific to your home? What are names of places where you have significant memories? Students then wrote some of their answers like "pictures of my family" or "whatever will be, will be," which they then circulated for their peers to read. Through this activity students were able to share their perspectives anonymously, reflect upon differences, and make connections among their peers. This collaborative process allowed students to bring their experiences to the foreground as the foundation of the class's critical inquiry, without being limited by their own experiences in considering the greater good.

Some students wrote down phrases and expressions that were spoken within their families in home languages other than English. Even though students did not attach their phrases and expressions to specific people, some students felt comfortable speaking to the whole class about their families' language practices and ideologies. The "Where I'm From" activity helped students realize all the different backgrounds within the classroom, expanding the initial emphasis on personal connections to a broader awareness of how society and life are experienced by diverse classmates. Many students realized that they may have misjudged someone or did not realize that a student had a diverse background—generally speaking, a person from outside the bounds of the cisgender, able-bodied, middle-upper-class White population—because they didn't appear to them to be from a nondominant demographic group.

"Take a Stand"

Another way Amanda elicited student interest in their public engagement was by urging them to "take a stand." For this activity students responded individually in writing to statements on a number of global and national issues such as terrorism, social equality, education, criminal justice, the environment, and immigration. Part of the goal of this activity was to open up dialogue before labeling someone as a (conservative) Republican or (liberal) Democrat. The written activity required students to agree or disagree with statements like the following, which reflected a

broader public debate about sanctuary cities protecting undocumented immigrants from deportation. This topic was highly controversial, representing a belief against which Donald J. Trump and his backers took a virulent stand:

[The U.S. state of] Virginia should have its larger cities, such as Richmond and Norfolk, serve as “sanctuary cities” in which no funds are spent to deport illegal immigrants and police/law enforcement officials are not allowed to inquire about a person’s legal status of immigration.

Students then accompanied their agreement/disagreement with an explanation, such as this justification written by one student:

Illegal immigrants are people, too. U.S. citizens don’t live in constant fear of being deported, so why should immigrants that came to the U.S. looking for a better life just like the ancestors of us citizens did? Many illegal immigrants came to America to escape poverty and war. Why should we prevent them from finding safety and sanctuary in our commonwealth?

Students appeared to feel comfortable expressing their own individual opinions and beliefs during this writing assignment, because they knew that no one in the classroom was going to judge or label them due to the private nature of their initial writing. We found that when issues were presented without political labels (liberal/conservative/Democrat/Republican), the students were more open to express their individual opinions. In previous work with students, we have found that students have been quick to label themselves as members of the same political party as their family members or friends. By bypassing common labels and getting at belief systems independent of political party affiliation (though inevitably related to them), we were able to focus on issues rather than familial politics and the often-rigid frameworks through which they channel thinking, perspective-taking, and public stances.

The “Take a Stand” activity gave students space to contemplate how they viewed an issue without knowing whether or not they were politically “for” or “against” a particular stance. This activity allowed students the opportunity to express their viewpoints without judgment so they could figure out which topics resonated with them most. Doing so in a private online forum—that is, in introspective, informal writing not designed for sharing with anyone other than the teacher—acknowledged that their beliefs and assumptions of the world were important to reflect upon as a beginning step toward greater understanding and toward developing critical faculties for interrogating their surroundings.

The activity also gave us insights into where students stood on a host of issues so that we could help them navigate constructing meaning from that starting point. In our experience, one of the pitfalls of addressing social justice in the classroom is the tendency to try to silence opposing viewpoints. We wanted to hear what students had to say to honor where students were coming from, while simultaneously trying to help them conceptualize a more just future. In eliciting from students why they believe what they do, we hoped to model self-reflective practices. Through examining where their perspectives originated, we hoped students might be more willing to examine other perspectives with a more open mind.

Topic proposals and gathering information

After students took a stand on these issues, they wrote topic proposals that acted as the basis for forming the collaborative small groups through which they would go through the *gathering information* stage of a critical inquiry process. The proposal required that students describe the two topics that interested them the most and explain why. One student, for instance, responded that she wanted to further explore the topic of terrorism:

My father was deployed [in the military] to Afghanistan back when us triplets were born, which affected my family in many different ways. Also, since my family is a military family, when the events on 9/11 happened, my mother was in New York (not by the Twin Towers), but my parents somewhat knew a few people that died in attack.

Because students were given choice, they were able to find topics that were personally meaningful, which encouraged their need to know and their further exploration into these issues. Importantly, these personal interests extended into the public forum in order to intersect with the web of conflicting beliefs to which they hoped to bring clarity and change through their inquiries. This stage extended into their deconstruction of social problems, consistent with the process of critical inquiry underlying the instruction.

In order to guide their inquiries, Amanda had her students complete a CRAAP (Currency, Relevancy, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose) test quest, an acronym that sounds as though it was made up by an educational satirist, yet that is widely used in many U.S. school districts, including Amanda's (see, e.g., Meriam Library & California State University, Chico, 2010). In the CRAAP test quest, Amanda gave students various websites, and students had to use the CRAAP criteria to determine if the sources were reliable or not and explain why. Amanda then gave them feedback and led the class in a review of their answers. The students next inquired a variety of possible topics for the Letters2prez 2.0 project to find a topic that interested them the most. They were given specific questions for each topic and used reliable sources to find the information. After this activity students completed a reflection regarding their process. In this segment of instruction, students both gathered and deconstructed information by critiquing its veracity and validity.

Peer-supported learning: Democracy in action

A peer-supported learning environment provides students opportunities to contribute, share with, and give feedback to one another (Ito et al., 2013). Throughout this project, students worked collaboratively in small peer groups to reimagine a more just world, a task designed to promote the reconstruction of society. These small groups were designed to function as democratic communities as students were required to engage in shared decision making, shared labor, and negotiation and compromise. Collaboration ideally involves capitalizing on individual strengths to support all group members, and developing new skills by learning from and with others.

Indeed, we found that working in the small groups seemed to contribute to students' creativity. For example, students who only wanted to write learned other possibilities for expression from students who wanted to use video and images. In this way, the project provided not only interest-powered instruction around topics, but interest-powered instruction around the processes of composing, all with social action as a compositional destination.

At the outset of the project, we did find that some students were hesitant to engage in public critical writing. However, we found that requiring students to work in small groups provided a medium for collaboration on these projects that helped students overcome their reticence. In each group, we found that there were at least one or two students who were so passionate about their topic that they appeared to motivate the other students to want to act and contribute to the cause. For example, when we interviewed the group of students who were creating a video about sexual harassment, one of the male students, Mason, said, "Listening to Erika and what had happened to her friend helped me really understand how big of a problem this is." This student said that previously he had little knowledge of how often and how many young people experience sexual harassment. Hearing Erika talk about the issue helped him understand just how prevalent sexual harassment was among his peers. We believe that structuring the project as a collaborative endeavor throughout the project positioned writing as a social practice. As such, the peer to peer conversations encouraged students who did not consider themselves as particularly "political" to take a stand on social issues important to the peers with whom they were collaborating.

We found that we needed to explicitly teach collaboration skills so that students could rely on one another throughout the project. For example, once small groups were formed based on students' interests, Amanda had them develop group norms where they outlined what makes a successful group and what hinders success. To facilitate effective group work daily, students rotated through group roles: facilitator & time tracker, team captain & reporter, recorder, lead researcher, and equipment manager.

Frequently, the writing students complete in school is done individually (Applebee & Langer, 2011). Students go through the entire process of inquiry and writing papers by themselves. Yet many young people are engaged in social composing processes in their lives outside school. This phenomenon is apparent in online fanfiction sites where young people actively read and revise one another's work and provide constructive and thorough feedback to one another (Black 2005). We worked to support and scaffold these kinds of social composing processes throughout the project.

For example, we modeled how to provide meaningful feedback and how to advocate for the kinds of feedback that would advance a project's persuasive potential. After students had brainstormed ideas for their projects, they were given a rubric, or scoring guide that included the criteria by which the final videos would be evaluated. The rubric was used along with both exemplary and problematic models to guide to the students' production of their videos. Before viewing the model videos,

the students were instructed to pair up and consult the rubric. After students watched the models, they identified qualities and problems they found with the presentations and shared them with their classmates. Amanda fostered a community where students valued and were able to easily give one another constructive feedback, a process they used several times. By the time students were ready with rough draft videos of their own, they were prepared to examine a rubric and give each other good feedback. Including social composing processes was of paramount importance to the success of this project, both in terms of the processes of problem-posing and inquiry techniques, and with respect to the shape and intent of the products of their inquiries.

Shared purpose: Cross-cultural and cross-generational connections

Connected learning provides opportunities for cross-cultural and cross-generational learning through web-based communities that foster connectedness around common interests (Ito et al. 2013). Throughout the inquiry process, students worked toward a shared purpose within their small group, as a whole class, and with a National Writing Project website viewed by young people eager to share their voices and perspectives. As they did so, they had opportunities to learn from others, who provided multiple perspectives and viewpoints.

The Letters2Prez 2.0 website also served as a way to build shared purpose. Throughout the project, we shared letters other young people had published to the website so that students could be exposed to topics of concern that they may not have been aware of before. Reading and viewing other young people's letters to the next president gave the students the chance to interact with multiple viewpoints and perspectives.

In addition, talking with their classmates provided them with perspectives that enabled them to examine and modify their beliefs. By bouncing ideas off one another, students engaged in a verification process as they worked to support their opinions responsibly. For example, in the "Take-a-stand" activity, students expressed their opinions on given current events such as, "[The U.S. state of] Virginia should not allow refugees from war-torn areas (for example: Iraq & Syria) to come into the state because they could be terrorists." In response, one student initially wrote, "We cannot risk having any terrorist in our state or country. It doesn't matter if you are not a terrorist, you still live in those conditions and agree with the bad guys. We do not know who is bad or not, we just cannot risk it at all."

After working in her project group on the topic of immigration and terrorism, her team's video concluded that Virginia should accept immigrants but should take measures to prevent terrorism. At the end of their video, the team proposed that the government should provide "increased security, better social media monitoring, or tougher federal bureaus." The collaborative group process appeared to moderate her views to produce a more nuanced view of understanding of how to manage immigration.

The project also afforded the students opportunities to learn from the perspectives of their elders. For example, one of the small groups was inquiring into the topic of immigration. In order to get a first-hand account of the immigrant experience, students interviewed a classmate's mother about her own experience immigrating to the US. This sort of inquiry experience was central to the processes of gathering information and deconstructing texts emphasized in critical pedagogies. As Hillocks (1995) would argue, the processes involved in doing so are not general, but specific to the task of conducting critical inquiry to produce an argument on an important social issue.

Academically oriented: Finding credible sources and using evidence responsibly

Connected learning encourages students to relate their interests to academic learning and civic engagement (Ito et al. 2013). This project encouraged students to become civically engaged through their self-directed inquiry into current local, national, and global issues, and ultimately to share their video letters with the next president. Throughout the inquiry process, we scaffolded the inquiry process so students would first evaluate the validity and reliability of sources. We held peer review sessions and teacher-student writing conferences to help students learn how to find and use evidence to undertake their critiques and support their claims. We found the conferencing sessions essential in helping students distinguish between fact and opinion, understand credible resources, and address bias.

We required students to continually check for bias, which helped them to expose and resist injustice throughout their inquiry rather than accept biased viewpoints as fact simply because they were published on the Internet. In our "post-truth" era where facts are disputed and there is a proliferation of "fake news," it was important to equip students with concrete skills to discern fact from opinion. Students began to address biases and inequality in their annotated bibliographies. One student, for instance, wrote about the disparity between viewpoints regarding gender equality, noting that there is a "disconnect between people experiencing oppression and people who are discounting the experiences of the oppressed." In a paragraph exploring economic inequality, one student discussed how economic inequality bleeds into inequities in political representation: "people who come from more money are able to be more involved in politics and other things that affect everyone." Being aware of the injustices inherent in U.S. social and political systems armed students with the knowledge to begin to resist them.

Production centered: Writing as making

Our students created video letters so that they could capitalize on multiple means of communication to persuade their audience. Throughout the production process students engaged in scriptwriting, storyboarding, and choosing video, music, and other images to convey the complexity of their topics. We found that student-generated

texts—in this case videos—potentially bring justice to life for students. Sharing these videos with their peers, local and state government officials, and the online community allowed students to have a voice in substantive issues and to give a voice to others who may not be fully empowered to speak out. Doing so moved their composing process beyond the notion of “publication” and into the realm of social action with their school experiences with texts.

As viewers of the videos, students in the class were given yet one more opportunity to see these issues through another lens. Although not every student working on this project outwardly broadened their perspectives, we hoped that the additive nature of being exposed to views that differ from their own would have some positive effect. Teachers benefit from recognizing that deeply held perspectives that threaten justice originate from contexts over which few have any control, and that broader social inequities are often replicated in classrooms (Lewis, 1997). Therefore, our goal as teachers revolved less around changing minds and more around opening minds to the possibility that perceptions alone are incomplete. The emphasis in connected learning on the individual, then, benefits from attention to critical theory’s focus on social contexts, such that the personal and the social become engaged in potentially powerful ways.

Openly networked sites potentially create an authentic audience

The *Letters2prez 2.0* website gives students a stake in the democratic process both as consumers and producers of knowledge. Most importantly, the project made students feel like agents for change on a national scale. The importance of providing an authentic audience for students’ writing cannot be underestimated. The majority of the students who participated in this project ultimately felt empowered to voice their informed opinions within their final letter because they had worked to inquire into multiple perspectives on their issue. This lesson can also inform adults, who (like kids) tend to judge and label people immediately when they voice opinions, especially with the heightened emotions evoked by the current political state. This project provided opportunities for students to develop empathy and listen to others without judgment. It gave them space to think critically, gather evidence to support a belief, and then critically examine beliefs that are not grounded in evidence.

THE RESISTANCE TO RESISTANCE

We have detailed thus far the process that Amanda took her students through in order to produce videos that demanded social action. Within her class and in the context of the National Writing Project’s website, the students’ videos served as powerful statements critiquing societal inequities. But within the school as a whole, critiques of school-based social problems were met by resistance from the administration, which did not want the school’s internal problems aired in public and which pushed back against their publication to stifle bad publicity and controversy. From a

sociocultural perspective, it's important to document the sort of resistance that social critiques can invite from those in power who would prefer that problems be ignored and covered up, rather than identified and addressed.

The recent U.S. student walkout over gun violence following the Parkland, Florida school massacre is instructive on this point. The occasional school leader (e.g., Bockman, 2018) viewed the walkout as an important act of defiance that merited administrative support. Yet as Downey (2018) reports, many administrations stifled protest with threats of suspension and other punishment for any student who participated in the protest. Resistance can be costly in terms of the high rates of stress it induces, often through pressure to desist from people in power (Eligon, 2018). Amanda's students experienced such resistance from the school administration when their critiques focused on problems within the school rather than on broader social issues not necessarily reflected in the school setting. We focus on one interview conducted with one of Amanda's students, Erika (a pseudonym), to illustrate this phenomenon of administrative resistance to student resistance, one that ought to be acknowledged in any critical pedagogy designed to exhort students to advocate for social change.

Erika summarized the problem she addressed in her group's video during an interview with Lindy: "Half of my friends have been experiencing sexual harassment. We had a platform [through this project] to express what was going on." Both schools and universities in the U.S. have longstanding problems with sexual harassment, and a culture of harassment appeared to be well-entrenched in Erika's school. Erika's group's video was designed to address that problem, imagine an alternative, and provide means to achieve it.

Erika reported that "Adults don't know what's happening in the hallways everyday [and don't] grasp the fact that this happens every day no matter where you are. It's not just in school [but everywhere]." Adult obliviousness to student-on-student sexual harassment allows it to go on unchecked, and adult resistance to hearing about it both silences young women and leaves them vulnerable to predatory conduct (Solnit, 2017).

Her group assembled carefully-vetted information about the global problem of sexual harassment. As Erika said to Lindy,

Six million people or something [had been victimized and] kept it to themselves, or people that don't even like acknowledge it as harassment because it's happened so many times, like you don't think about the extent of it. All this has been reported over like six hundred thousand times in the U.S. ... When you look at the numbers, it's a lot deeper than you think, and it hit you harder.

Erika felt that presenting the group's case through the medium of a video had far greater impact than a written text would. When they shared their video with the class, she said, it was met with "a lot of shock and sadness, 'cause of all the statistics we had in there ... Everyone was quiet for a couple minutes 'cause they didn't really know how to take it in ... [Sexual harassment] is happening everywhere." Erika felt

apprehension in advance of releasing the video to the public, saying that it was “a little scary for us ‘cause we didn't know how everyone is going to react to it.”

And indeed, the school administrators did not want to hear about it, telling her that she needed to tell “both sides” of the story, presumably including the viewpoint of the males subjecting the young women to harassment. To Erika, “There's two sides to every story, but one side is more prevalent when it comes to this. And one is probably truer than another, so you can't put this out there because it's not true, and it's happening to you.” Erika said the administration never punished her, but applied significant pressure to modify the aspects of the video that put the school in a negative light. Meanwhile, she said, “My classmates and my teachers definitely appreciated it, and they like learned something from it when they watched the video.”

When asked if anything in her school had changed as a result of the video's production, Erika said that no official action had been taken by the administration. Yet, she said, “I haven't heard much [harassment] happening, and it hasn't happened to anyone I know this year.” The school had changed principals since the prior year's administrative resistance, and perhaps that change helped to shift the school culture. It's impossible to argue causally from the production of the video to Erika's perception that subsequently the school seemed less abusive. But as she experienced the phenomenon, the video did have both a local impact in addressing a local problem, and a broader influence on the national scene through its availability through the National Writing Project's platform.

The experience left Erika eager to take on a role in social reform. She said, “I'll definitely just try to get my voice out there.” The Virginia governor, she said, watched some of her class's videos, suggesting that they were having an impact beyond classroom activities and publications that are ends in themselves. Through these activities, Erika felt transformed and empowered to become an agent for social change, with a new understanding of how to take a personal set of experiences, put them in a broader social context, investigate a topic of concern and critique available sources, imagine an alternative, and act to make changes resulting in greater equity and respect.

DISCUSSION

As a result of students' experiencing agency through the *Letters2prez* campaign and the positive reception students received from local and state government officials who viewed their videos, we have adapted the project so we can continue to encourage students' civic engagement. We created a Letters to the Governor website as a forum for our students' video letters and to elicit the voices of youth across our state. Our aim is the continued civic engagement of students in local, national, and global issues even in non-election years. Critical civic engagement can help enable students to imagine, and ultimately help to produce, a more equitable world.

Critical engagement requires an understanding of composing processes that extends beyond the stage of publication, and that recognizes the task-specific nature of writing instruction. General process models are limited by their assumption that all writing involves the same series of steps, and by their culmination of the process with publication rather than social action. The actions of Amanda's students during this project suggest that students are capable of much more than producing texts and calling it quits.

If students are to take their compositional work seriously, including a stage of this sort seems important. Some writing may not require social action; indeed, Yagelski (2009) argues that even publication is unnecessary and perhaps is counterproductive if the goal is to emphasize the experience of writing, a belief we find questionable in light of our work with this project, and that we find more likely to produce the reification of prior beliefs that concerns Fendler (2003) than the social change inherent to critical pedagogies. If adolescence is a time of decentering the ego and becoming more socially aware (Newman & Newman, 2001), we believe that instruction of this sort can promote civic engagement and social responsibility in a time of ideological cacophony such as that currently affecting the U.S. Sorting through the news, fake and otherwise, requires critical attention and methods that can be taught; and learning how to work with others to produce change benefits from structured processes available through scaffolded instruction.

We see the work of Amanda's students as important in helping young people look beyond their personal experiences to envision a world that is better for people unlike themselves, and believe that the imperative for entering their published texts into a national dialogue led to a greater sense of personal and collective agency among her students. This sort of emotionally-driven, reasoned response to inequity potentially produces the sort of citizen who can help to right our tilting ship of state in stormy times and help set a course better aligned with the U.S. ideals as stated in its founding documents. Our students deserve these opportunities if they are to grow into the leaders that their generation will need to navigate the increasingly ideological waters that surround their life's journey.

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