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Youth as Cosmopolitan Intellectuals

Two high school teachers examine classroom moments that position youth as cosmopolitan intellectuals and invested community members as opposed to disengaged and disaffected adolescents.

I'm from "you'll understand when you're older," but perfectly understanding right now.

—*Talia, poetry excerpt, grade 10*

In many places in their lives, youth hear that they are *not yet* ready to understand difficult personal and social issues, yet they are, in fact, invested in critical social questions that affect their lives and those of their families and communities. In this article, we examine how we—as high school teachers—have cultivated classroom spaces for youth to critically interrogate social questions and foster values of global citizenship and communal responsibility. Following Gerald Campano and Maria Paula Ghiso, who consider immigrant youth and their families to be cosmopolitan intellectuals, we take the stance that all youth are already cosmopolitan intellectuals engaged in contemporary cultural and political debates and realities with their friends and families. Thus, we focus our pedagogical endeavors on cultivating spaces where youth engage in salient critical conversations, while also building a vocabulary to recognize, read, and articulate the issues they are already discussing. Contrary to mainstream views that read youth as in a state of “becoming” and “developing,” we see youth as already engaged in conversations around issues from which our communities are not protecting them (e.g., immigration policies, racial and ethnic biases, homophobia, misogyny).

As practicing teachers with a critical youth lens, we eschew visions of youth as inexperienced or innocent. Nonetheless, we are not immune to anxieties about where we “draw the line” in terms of pedagogical content given systemic understandings

about what’s emotionally, intellectually, and morally “appropriate” for adolescents in our schools and communities (see Lesko; Niccolini; Petrone and Lewis; Sarigianides). In our high school classes, youth investigate ideas and concepts that might make some of our colleagues, administrators, or parents uncomfortable. However, when we talk about contemporary social realities and injustices in our classrooms, we do so in the spirit of fostering cosmopolitan ideals of global citizenship, cultivating curiosity about the ways that other people live and arrange their lives, and illuminating the socially situated construction of our lives.

We see youth as intellectually invested global citizens ready for curriculum that encourages them to cultivate cosmopolitan habits of mind such as cooperation and hospitality, dialogue and curiosity. Social scientists, philosophers, and educational researchers are beginning to reexamine the classical idea of cosmopolitanism; the notion of being a “citizen of the world” is particularly germane in our increasingly interconnected and interdependent global community. Educational philosopher David T. Hansen posits that a cosmopolitan-minded education “can assist people in cultivating thoughtful receptivity to the new and reflective loyalty to the known” (1). Further, he notes that a cosmopolitan-minded education moves beyond tolerance or pluralism and toward a deeper understanding and investment in the varying ideas and values of others, drawing upon our existing awareness of the cultural hybridity of our world.

Nikos Papastergiadis notes that we might find small moments of cosmopolitan understanding when examining “the little connections that slip between cultures, and the small degrees of overlap between different people” (144). These cosmopolitan “glimpses” are not just moments of tolerance, but rather deep and sustaining moments of transaction and understanding that enable us to both accept and feel accepted. In a recent article, Lalitha Vasudevan builds upon Papastergiadis and others offering that we might “glimpse” cosmopolitan ideals of belonging in spontaneous, everyday moments with youth by attending to “the micro-moments of meaning making across differences to be found in embodied forms of interaction such as laughter, physicality, and physical proximity as well as in the composing of more ephemeral texts such as singing or improvised dialogue” (50). We read the classroom encounters we describe below through a cosmopolitan lens, seeing moments such as youth huddling in a circle to share stories or giggling together as they critique a music video as cosmopolitan “glimpses” of belonging, moments marked by curiosity, hospitality, and acceptance.

Our small high school in New York City is incredibly diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, ability, and socioeconomic—a unique context that we understand affords a particular richness for critical conversations about privilege and justice. The curriculum is particularly rigorous, requiring quantitative and qualitative courses for all four years of high school. The research curriculum aims to teach students to ask their own questions, expose them to multiple and competing perspectives, and train them in methods to seek answers to the questions they have. In our qualitative research courses, we build curriculum around contemporary social issues and train students to be ethnographic fieldworkers, capable of designing research studies to address social questions. Tiffany writes about her required tenth-grade Qualitative Research course; Chris writes about his eleventh-grade Sociology and Gender elective. We understand that the courses we describe are unusual at this regressive moment in US schools and that we are operating from a tremendous amount of curricular freedom. In crafting

this piece, we each draw upon our teacher journals, classroom artifacts, and ongoing conversations with students and each other about the value of research and theory in understanding everyday life.

In the two vignettes below, we offer pedagogical and curricular moments that position youth as cosmopolitan intellectuals and invested community members as opposed to hormonal, disengaged, and disaffected adolescents. Further, we interrogate our own stories, often publicly unpacking our positionalities (e.g., whiteness, queerness) as we invite youth to unpack theirs. We also make visible the ways in which embracing youths’ intellectual prowess and communal investment can provoke tensions in school communities. In what follows, we explore some possibilities in seeing youth as cosmopolitan intellectuals already and ourselves as curators of theoretical and popular cultural texts in the classroom.

Vignette #1: “It makes me feel less alone to see other people caring about this.”

I (Tiffany) have centered my tenth-grade Qualitative Research course on participatory projects that address questions such as “What matters to you?” and “What in your community bothers you?,” questions that mark youth as people who care about the world—and questions they are not often asked in school. Youths’ lived experiences are regularly the texts of the course; we begin by considering the social construction of our identities and then move to studying social issues in participatory, community-based research projects. Youth reflect on embodied and communal knowledge to interrogate how systems of injustice and inequity are produced and reproduced. We develop and refine research questions for the participatory action research projects collectively, visually mapping out personal connections to the social issues youth identify. My co-teacher and I join small groups of youth in sharing our stories about how our lives and the lives of people we care about have been affected by issues such as increased standardized testing, metal detectors in our school, or contemporary immigration policies. Through stories, both youth and teachers come to know one another more deeply, fostering accountability to one another and bolstering our investment in

Youths’ lived experiences are regularly the texts of the course.

critiquing and challenging social structures that affect our community.

The “glimpse” I interrogate below occurred toward the end of the data collection phase for the participatory action research projects. I became concerned about the progress and methodology of a couple of small groups and had separate check-in conversations with each, suggesting intimate ways to gather primary data within the space of the classroom. Then, I continued on, engaging in conversations with other groups, responding to queries on methodology and analysis, and observing, really, taking it all in. The following excerpt from my teacher journal describes what happened next:

Midway through class, I looked up and noticed that several youth had migrated to the hallway. I went to the door, a bit anxious—other teachers had gently complained about the noise on warm, late spring days when open doors were essential to move air through hot classrooms. As I peered outside the classroom door, I noted about a dozen youth seated in a circle in the hallway, most with knees crossed, leaning in to hear the quiet speaker. Emmanuel was standing and video recording—slowly moving his personal cell phone from speaker to speaker capturing their words and expressions without being intrusive. A school audio-recorder and additional cell phones were strewn about to capture voices. As I listened for a moment, I made note that Terrence was leading the group, a list of questions resting on his lap. Anya recounted a story from the train, of a woman asking her, “What are you? Indian?” Her hands fluttered about as she told her peers she’d eventually identified herself as Muslim, only to watch the woman move away from her. Rashid responded, “Like what does that question even mean, ‘What are you?’ I’m a person, a human.” He then described the times he’d been asked the same question and its dehumanizing impact on him. Terrence, a Haitian youth, then shared his own experiences of facing discrimination in the form of wary eyes and tightly clutched bags. I quietly took a seat on the floor. (teacher journal, May 22, 2013)

I later learned that Anya’s and Rashid’s stories were responses to Terrence’s question, “Do you think traditions and customs cause others to treat you differently?” Later in the conversation, youth linked their personal stories to systemic inequities, media hysteria over Islamic fundamentalism, and

contemporary immigration policies. In working from the personal to the political, their embodied experiences were elevated as data for interrogation and theorized as concepts to help them understand our society. In other words, their personal experiences of racism honored each individual’s lived experiences and reframed their experiences within structural contexts. Young people are already regularly engaged in critical conversations on social and political issues with their friends and families. (To this point, several groups of tenth graders this same year were critically examining the pervasive use of racist jokes among their diverse groups of friends and in TV shows such as *Family Guy* and *South Park*.) By examining their own experiences as data for their research projects, youth were able to consider the embodied realities of discrimination, name them within contemporary anxieties, frame them in histories of oppression, and reclaim them in communities of support and understanding. In the focus group conversation, I recognized emotions of passion and anger as youth articulated and analyzed hurtful narratives. I also noted cosmopolitan “glimpses” of connection, affiliation, and belonging as their narratives were woven together.

By seeing youth as cosmopolitan intellectuals, we cultivate new kinds of classroom spaces. When students’ social concerns and intellectual interests drive the curriculum, teachers productively destabilize our positions as the knowers in the classroom and move toward more equitably sharing decision-making power in the space. We instead enact what Elisabeth Soep and Vivian Chavez term “collegial pedagogy,” a form of pedagogy where educators become constructive and knowledgeable collaborators who offer feedback and support based on their experiences in their disciplines. In this moment, I leaned on my experience as an ethnographer, posing questions, listening, brainstorming solutions, and then stepping away. As I walked away, I heard Terrence ask, “OK, what do we really want to know? Who can we get to talk to us about this?” By giving feedback as a trained ethnographer but leaving decision-making up to the youth researchers, I positioned the youth as critical and capable intellectuals, and they, in turn, positioned their classmates as knowers, whose embodied experiences and research knowledge were valuable and instructive to them.

Contrary to visions of adolescents as disinterested or self-centered, this moment tells a story of young people committed to equity and justice. Naomi, reflecting on the project, offered: “It makes me feel less alone to see other people caring about this.” The focus group offered a moment for youth to “glimpse” deep caring for one another and made visible their capacity to extrapolate cosmopolitan ideals of belonging and connection from their embodied experiences and theory-mediated readings of their lives. Sarah, reflecting on the project, offered: “being a part of society makes us responsible for the events around us and for understanding and fixing them.” Positioning youth as doers and knowledge generators within the space of the classroom promotes shared responsibility and empathy,

which are precursors to affiliation, belonging, and activist impulses.

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Vignette #2: “What did you notice?”

In what follows, I (Chris) share a moment from an eleventh-grade research course, Sociology and Gender, which introduces youth to key concepts in the field of sociology

and incorporates queer and gender theory to examine, deconstruct, and problematize our notions of gender. Throughout the course, we ground theory in youths’ lives and popular culture texts. My goal in planning the course has been to take theory, which is often reserved for college or even graduate settings, “to the public,” as Saskia Sassen writes, and to cultivate a relationship with theory as a way of seeing for the public, or in our case for youth (403). To facilitate theory-building and cultural analysis, I curate popular cultural texts (e.g., music videos, television performances) and match them with germane theoretical texts.

In a recent project, students conducted an extended study of a self-selected key theorist to present to their peers. As I was circulating the classroom during a planning session, Oliver, who was studying Raewyn Connell, called me over. He turned his laptop toward me and pressed Play: a sweaty, panting Kim Kardashian strides away from

a generically handsome man. As she paces away, the camera pans down, taking its time and eventually settling on her shoes—the product being advertised. Oliver pauses the video. “So isn’t this like Connell’s idea of hegemonic masculinity?”

“I don’t know, what do you notice?”

“Cause the focus is on her body, and he’s looking. He has control. The camera focuses on her body for—I counted—19 seconds, over half of the commercial.”

“Do you see anything else going on? What about patriarchal dividend?”

“Well there are two men in the commercial, the one in the beginning has the more perfect gender and the one at the end seems average.” (Kate Bornstein writes about perfect identities as a way of examining the relationship between identities and power.)

We continued on this way and later, during his presentation, he played the clip again and turned to the class. “What did you notice?”

In braiding Connell’s theories and Kardashian’s commercial, Oliver and I deconstructed the practices that perpetuate men’s dominance over women and the way that said privilege is divided among men according to other identity categories (e.g., race, class, sexual orientation). Oliver and his peers brought ingenuity to the connections they made. Our conversation and many of the theories we encountered began in territory that they clearly had discussed and thought about prior to entering our class, engendering a sense of curiosity and hospitality toward the challenging subject. As an educator in this setting, my role has been to curate texts and collaborate with students. By attempting to draw out connections and using questioning as a primary tool to push youth further, we developed a vocabulary to express what they see across their lives and sharpen the vision with which they entered our class. Our conversation about Connell and masculinity was only the start of one that continued throughout the semester and evolved. The language and terminology of Connell and other theorists served as the constant across our curricular conversations.

In another project, youth developed interactive exhibits to highlight one gender or sexuality concept that resonated with them personally. Oliver decided to focus his analysis on hip-hop and

gender. In a workshop he called me over. “Why do rappers insult each other’s gender?”

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

He looked puzzled for a moment, “But why gender? They could look up someone’s background and easily find things to insult.”

He continued to provide a list of examples where that had been the case, but always after some insult about another artist’s sexuality or gender had already been made. I prodded: “Think about Bornstein when she talks about a perfect gender and the relationship between gender, identity, desire, and power. What does focusing on another rapper’s sexuality mean?”

“Oh, like by calling them gay they’re trying to say that they are less of a man.”

“OK, but why do that? Why insult one another in the first place?”

“It’s like that Connell thing [patriarchal dividend] they are trying to take away the other one’s power and say they are less than they are.”

“But why is gender and sexuality the go-to? Why not race, class, or habitat?”

Oliver took a minute and began to write fervently. I continued to move about the room.

Oliver clearly had many new ideas and material to sort through. He knew he was figuring out how to put everything into words—and I tried to get him to consider many different aspects of the conversation. The use of homophobic insults between hip-hop artists and in their lyrics was a fascinating choice. Music, insults, and hip-hop were all territory over which we had not tread in our course, yet Oliver adeptly applied the theories we learned to his reading of these texts. The number of critical questions he generated throughout this assignment astonished me, and the language and vocabulary he built to describe and interrogate what he was seeing across different texts that matter in his life did just the same. By positioning Oliver and the rest of the young people in this course as cosmopolitan intellectuals, as people who are aware of and curious to learn more about other ways of being in this world, we were able to go deeper and to develop an intellectual practice of learning to question the world and take those questions seriously. Using popular culture texts, beyond their immediate appeal, also encourages cosmopolitan ways of seeing empathetically to understand stories and experiences that may

not be our own; it enables them to see the other in texts and learn to break down and reimagine contemporary power structures.

Closing Thoughts

English language arts classrooms ought to be spaces to engage in theoretical musings, take time to unpack underlying belief systems that inform our daily lives, and create meaningful encounters with one another as invested citizens of the world. In building a partnership with youth that repositions them as cosmopolitan intellectuals and furthers their role in constructing educational spaces, educators can push critical conversations forward and find moments to “glimpse” worlds previously unrecognized. Below we note how teachers might enact curriculum that positions youth as cosmopolitan intellectuals interested in deeply interrogating social questions that affect our communities.

Move beyond tolerance. When educators speak about diverse ways of being in the world within the current pluralistic paradigm, we often stop at tolerance. Within cosmopolitan and critical frameworks, tolerance is only a step in the process toward curiosity, respect, and ultimately alliance building. One way we move beyond tolerance to curiosity is by valuing and interrogating youths’ stories and popular media texts as intellectual resources.

Share accountability. When youth and educators know one another, share struggles, and truly listen, we become more accountable for one another’s well-being. In co-constructing emotionally and intellectually hospitable spaces, and foregrounding our investment in important social questions, our visions of one another are transformed and level of concern deepened.

“Glimpse” belonging. Educators notice and cultivate moments of youth welcoming one another with generosity—finding “glimpses” of cosmopolitan belonging in moments as simple as youth huddling in the hallway or singing along to a carefully selected music video. These moments are generative spaces from which to build the intellectual practice of questioning and genuine discussion.

The number of critical questions he generated throughout this assignment astonished me.

Coalition-build. Envisioning youth as co-investigators, activists, and allies interested in developing partnerships that work toward more just spaces has the power to transform our schools and communities. By refining their vision and ability to articulate structures of power, youth become more effective allies in responding to oppressive structures.

In the face of regressive educational practices, such as the testing regime, that do not recognize what youth bring to our classrooms and have the effect of disengaging them from educational and intellectual pursuits, we argue that English language arts teachers are well positioned to construct spaces where intellectualism and cosmopolitanism are nurtured. Cultivating the innate intellectual habits and practices that our young people bring to us by recognizing their unique capacities and engaging them in thoughtful exploration and reflection will enable our youth to envision new possibilities for belonging, being, and existing in the world more justly. 

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