Changing Through Laughter with "Laughter for a Change"

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educate

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> *"I really enjoy improv…In life you normally have to plan out your decisions and actions and, in improv, you just do it right there on the spot. [Improv]…gives me a way of expressing myself in the moment. You have fun, and everyone just loves what you do."*

Bennett, 17 years old, participant in Laughter for a Change's after-school improvisational theater program at Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools

Most youths identify the fun of improvisational theater (improv) as their takeaway from participation. Improv *is* fun! But when it comes to convincing skeptical educators of the value of improv, such a testimonial falls short for two reasons. First, because fun is not the sole outcome of participation; improv instructors always witness their students develop in multiple domains. Second, because the imperativeness of fun for learning (Barab, Arici, & Jackson, 2005)—that is, the necessity of enjoying the process in order to really learn—is not universally recognized yet.

Systematic observation, research, and analysis of Laughter for a Change (L4C)'s 2011–2012 after-school improv workshop revealed the program's multiple impacts. Our data suggest that improvising creates a "safe space," a supportive context in which participants feel empowered to take risks and play freely. Such a positive affective climate—in which, according to Bennett, "everyone just loves what you do"—facilitates meaningful learning (Meyer & Turner, 2006). In the case of L4C, this meaningful learning comprised identity exploration, great understanding between different generations, development of theatrical skills, and personal and social growth.

Figure 1. A high-five following the group's successful completion of the "Conducted Story" game.

Moreover, this learning did not occur despite the fun that the participants had—it occurred precisely because of the fun.

Improvisational Theater's Relationship to Social Change

Improvisational theater occurs within a community of practice, constructs and maintains a learning environment in which safety, trust, and positive affect flourish, and operates through play. Improv's capacity to educate is embedded in its DNA. Using improvisational theater for socially meaningful ends is a well-established practice. Although improv is most widely known for its powerful influence on popular culture, it got its start in the United States as a vehicle for learning and social change.

In the early part of the 20th century, global children's game curator Neva Boyd pioneered the use of recreational games as a means to teach language skills, problem solving, self-confidence, and social skills (Bailey, 2009). Boyd's protégé, Viola Spolin, applied Boyd's learning-through-play technique in her job as drama director and social worker at Chicago's Hull House. In order to achieve her goals of both stimulating creative expression and building community among Chicago's diverse immigrant populations, Spolin expanded on Boyd's work, creating and revising theater games from 1939 to 1941 (Bailey). Spolin published her seminal text, *Improvisations for the Theater*, in 1963 and continued to explore the power of improvisational games and play for the rest of her life. She was particularly interested in how group play helps individual participants to get more deeply in touch with their own intuition and how the culture of learning spaces impacts education. According to Spolin (1963, 1999), "No one teaches anyone anything. If the environment permits it, anyone can learn whatever he chooses to learn; and if the individual permits it, the environment will teach him everything it has to teach" (p. 3).

Figure 2. Spolin with members of her Young Actors Company— including Alan Arkin and Alan Alda1—which she ran in Hollywood, California, from 1946 to 1955. (Image source: http://www.spolin.us/violabio.)

In 1959 Spolin's son Paul Sills founded Chicago's famed improvisational theater, The Second City. Not only did Sills appropriate and further develop his mother's games for use with his ensemble, but he also incorporated satire, parody, clowning, commedia dell'arte, vaudeville, burlesque, and cabaret into his comedic formula. The Second City also purposefully breaks the fourth wall of conventional theater by acknowledging and directly addressing the audience. Collectively, these theatrical techniques function as tools that can illuminate absurdities that we regularly encounter in life.[1]

Perhaps improvisational theater's capacity to speak truth to power reflects the nature of its early practitioners, many of whom were iconoclasts committed to both questioning authority and poking fun at rigid, conventional points of view. Del Close, grandfather of long-form improv and the icon of most of today's top improvisers (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994), is a case in point. He is remembered today not only for his genius but also for his outrageous worldview. As Close once told his protégé, Laughter for a Change founder Ed Greenberg, "If we're not offending somebody, we're not doing our job." This interest in disrupting the status quo, however, did not signal a callous disregard for others. Close instilled in his thousands of students an ethos of respect and support that became "more nearly a philosophy or way of life than just a way of getting laughs" (McGrath, 2012, para. 37).

Brazilian theater director Augusto Boal might be considered the most overt practitioner of improvisational theater for social action and political protest. Particularly motivated by fellow countryman Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* a ground-breaking sociological examination of class and education, Boal vividly conceptualized the dramatic arts as a weapon against tyranny. He reframed both the spectator as an actor and the oppressed as revolutionaries (Sierz, 2009). Boal's classic text, *Theater of the Oppressed* (1974), inspired a movement of the same name that still exists today (The International Theater of the Oppressed Organisation, n.d.). From Spolin to Boal, these masters of improvisational theater all shared a common belief: The collaborative work of players and "spect-actors," as Boal called the audience, could foster learning, action, and change.

The Educational Implications of Community, Culture, and Play

Literature from the fields of educational theory, developmental psychology, literacy, and game studies explains why improvisational theater works as a tool for education and engagement: it is because participation is powerful, learning environments influence outcomes, and play is educational.

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[1] The Second City has trained many of the actors and writers of the legendary sketch television show *Saturday Night Live* (1975–present), and scores of America's top comedy stars—including John Belushi, Tina Fey, Steve Carell, and Stephen Colbert—cut their teeth on improvisational theater.

Cognitive anthropologists Lave and Wenger famously articulated in *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (1991) that learning occurs within a community of practice. In the years following, many scholars have emphasized the importance of contextualization and community. Action researchers Rogoff, Turkanis, and Bartlett (2001) documented the rich learning that occurred when parents, students, and teachers alike pooled their knowledge and set off on educational quests together. According to literacy, education, and game studies expert Gee (2008), "Good learning requires participation—however vicarious—in some social group that helps learners understand and make sense of their experience in certain ways" (p. 23).

The culture of learning environments also influences the magnitude of their educational impact. Meaningful learning requires safety and trust; most students will only pursue out-of-the-box innovation if they feel that the environment is a safe space for spectacular failures and trust that the community will respect their unique perspectives and essential humanity. For such safety and trust to develop, all members of a learning community must support diversity in multiple forms, including diversity of experience, ability, interest, and method. To achieve that, the ways in which power, status, and cultural norms may shape classroom work need to be identified and challenged (Lewis, 2001), and "perspective-taking, empathy, and acceptance of one's own and others' responsibilities within the group" need to be honored (Reilly, Jenkins, Felt, & Vartabedian, 2012, pp. 20–21). According to educational psychologists Meyer and Turner (2006), positive affective classroom cultures encourage students to take academic risks and to work toward mastery, both of which boost student learning.

Understanding the critical role of safety and trust in fostering meaningful learning helped to inspire the creation of Participatory Learning And You! (PLAY!), a multifaceted educational research project designed by the University of South California (USC)'s Project New Media Literacies. The PLAY! project reported five key principles for nurturing an educational climate conducive to participatory learning:

1. Participants have many chances to exercise *creativity* through diverse media, tools, and practices;
2. Participants adopt an ethos of *co-learning*, respecting each person's skills and knowledge;
3. Participants experience heightened *motivation* and *engagement* through meaningful play;
4. Activities feel **relevant** to learners' identities and interests;
5. An integrated learning system—or *learning ecosystem*—honors rich connections between home, school, community and world. (Reilly, Vartabedian, Felt, & Jenkins, 2012, p. 4)

Similarly, affective neuroscientists Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) argue that emotion and learning are inextricably linked:

> First, neither learning nor recall happens in a purely rational domain, divorced from emotion, even though some of our knowledge will eventually distill into a moderately

rational, unemotional form. Second, in teaching students to minimize the emotional aspects of their academic curriculum and function as much as possible in the rational domain, educators may be encouraging students to develop the sorts of knowledge that inherently do not transfer well to real-world situations. (p. 9)

In other words, as the title of Immordino-Yang and Damasio's article proclaims, "we feel, therefore we learn."

Finally, play is an important piece of the learning puzzle. According to Piaget, all children learn through play. Educational technologists Barab, Arici, and Jackson recommend evaluating educational activities in terms of the extent to which they integrate play (2005). Communication technologies expert Douglas Thomas and organizational studies researcher John Seely Brown also recognize the educational potential of play. In their review of today's "world of constant change" and prognostication of tomorrow's challenges, they maintain that "When play happens within a medium for learning—much like a culture in a petri dish—it creates a context in which information, ideas, and passions grow" (Thomas & Brown, 2011, p. 18).

Influential publication *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robison, 2006) identified play within its evolving set of new media literacies, or "cultural competencies and social skills that young people need in the new media landscape" (p. 4). With PLAY!, USC's Project New Media Literacies closely examined play as a new media literacy, defining *play* as "the capacity to experiment with one's surroundings as a form of problem-solving" (Jenkins et al., p. 4). Language, literacy, and culture expert Wohlwend (2011) similarly understands play as a literacy and also recognizes its ability to shape identity and relationships. As famed children's television host Rogers and early childhood advocate Sharapan contend, "Play is a very serious matter… It is an expression of our creativity; and creativity is at the very root of our ability to learn, to cope, and to become whatever we may be" (1994, p. 13).

Laughter for a Change

Laughter for a Change, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, uses play to both follow and extend improvisational theater's legacy of civic engagement. Its mission is to employ improvisational theater games and comedy training to foster new forms of learning, and to contribute to healing and a sense of well-being, particularly among underserved populations. Since L4C founder Greenberg is an acquaintance of the late Spolin, a former colleague of Sills, past director of The Second City, and a protégé of Close, he is uniquely qualified to head this socially minded organization.

Greenberg established L4C in 2007, following his stint as a cultural envoy to Rwanda. Charged by the U.S. Department of State with the task of helping genocide survivors to "learn to laugh again," Greenberg introduced improvisational theater to Rwandans (McFarren, 2011). He trusted that

engaging with improv's central tenets—"playing agreement, risk taking, spontaneity, changing perspectives, opening up to moments of discovery and surprise, [and] making active, not passive, choices"—would facilitate healing (as cited in McFarren, 2011, p. 166). And it did. Rwandan participants embraced the workshop enthusiastically and continued to create comedy content even after the program was over, prompting the head of the U.S. Department of State's cultural envoy initiative to conclude, "This is the kind of program that keeps us doing what we do" (R. Keith, personal communication, November 1, 2007).

Greenberg and his staff of L4C Comedy Mentors use theater games—some invented by Spolin and others inspired by her work—to help participants build confidence and community. While L4C runs workshops with senior citizens, military veterans, and residents of homeless shelters, its primary focus is working with youths. L4C Comedy Mentors work with juvenile offenders at Pacific Lodge Youth Services, middle schoolers at Los Angeles's Koreatown Youth and Community Center, and fifth graders at five Los Angeles elementary schools. In addition, during the 2011–2012 school year, L4C Comedy mentors worked with high school students at the Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools in urban Los Angeles.

Methodology

Program Partners

In 2010 USC's Project New Media Literacies launched research project PLAY! to investigate how to integrate the tools, insights, and skills of a participatory culture into the public education system of the United States (Felt, Vartabedian, Literat, & Mehta, 2012; Reilly, Jenkins, Felt, & Vartabedian, 2012; Reilly, Vartabedian, Felt, & Jenkins, 2012; Literat, 2013; Micheli, 2013). A year later, USC's Project New Media Literacies partnered with community-based organization RFK-Legacy in Action (RFK-LA) to pursue on-the-ground research and outreach. Not only was RFK-LA's expansive digital media lab located at the heart of the RFK Community Schools campus, but RFK-LA's dedication "to fostering a more just society by training young people to use new media for social action" (RFK: Legacy in Action, n.d.) echoed the research group's own goals.

USC's Project New Media Literacies and RFK-LA offered the RFK-based media lab to L4C for running an after-school improv workshop that would extend opportunities for practicing new media literacies—particularly the new media literacy *play*—to members of the RFK community. L4C accepted the challenge and provided instructional staff and curricula as well as recruited prospective RFK participants. USC's Project New Media Literacies provided research support and also recommended the workshop to Los Angeles Unified School District educators participating in its PLAYing Outside the Box professional development program (Vartabedian & Felt, 2012).

Research Question

Through this collaborative effort, USC's Project New Media Literacies, RFK-LA, and L4C hoped to discover how, if at all, engaging in play—specifically play structured by theater games—impacts participating youths' proficiency in the new media literacy *play* and/or their development of other personal and social skills.

Recruitment

Greenberg recruited students from the theater arts classes of RFK's Los Angeles High School of the Arts. Theater educators Annie Simons and Sam Toffler also strongly encouraged their students— particularly freshmen who had not been cast in the school play—to attend L4C's program. Both teachers were familiar with improv and were able to attest to its value for aspiring actors and those seeking fun after-school engagement.

Participants

Approximately 12 of these theater students regularly attended L4C's fall sessions. However, due to both the program's open door policy and various unplanned scheduling complications (e.g., detentions, transportation problems, field trips, and test preparations), the number of attendees per session fluctuated from 8 to15.

Ninety-one percent of the 12 core participants were freshmen, and the group was balanced in terms of gender (six females and six males). The group's ethnic makeup—83% Latino, 17% African American—reflected that of the wider RFK community. RFK's students hail from Pico Union and surrounding neighborhoods that, collectively, comprise the most densely populated area in California. Eighty-nine percent of the school-age population is from low-income households, and 50% are English Language Learners. Both conversation with participants and their later scene work revealed that they were first-generation Americans and that their parents spoke Spanish at home.

Data Collection

Laurel J. Felt, a trained improviser and research assistant with USC's Project New Media Literacies, attended approximately 80% of the L4C at RFK sessions. While her primary mode of data collection was taking ethnographic field notes as a participant-observer, Felt also took photographs of the workshops' process, implemented semistructured interviews, and assisted with survey design.

Interviews

Felt conducted voluntary interviews on the last day of the fall semester. Following the final game and winter break send-off, participants lingered in the media lab, munching on popcorn, joking, laughing, and comparing dance moves. Felt invited any interested participants to talk with her

about their L4C at RFK experiences; a desktop computer running PhotoBooth, a video-recording application, was positioned toward them, transparently capturing their commentary. In addition to following up on specific comments, Felt asked four questions of all participants (see Appendix A). Five participants chose to be interviewed. Felt transcribed their remarks and applied thematic analysis.

Surveys

Although L4C had planned to offer its RFK workshop only during the fall semester, strong student interest motivated L4C to return in the spring. Felt and Greenberg designed a short survey prior to the spring semester's February kickoff. They focused exclusively on areas that theory and past experience suggested would shift – namely, identity, skill perceptions, and comfort levels. The survey sought to discover whether participants identified themselves as imaginative, playful, comedically insightful, creative, self-confident, risk-aversive, and/or tolerant. It also inquired about participants' perceptions of their skills in problem solving, persevering, relationship building, listening, communicating, and focusing. Finally, the survey asked about participants' comfort with working in groups and public speaking. For the complete survey instrument, see Appendix B.

Greenberg and L4C Comedy Mentor Kat Primeau, who attended 90% of the L4C at RFK sessions, offered this paper-and-pencil survey to every participant who walked through the door from February 21 to March 6, 2012. Over this three-week span, 15 participants—3 new and 12 returning—completed surveys. But as the semester continued, only about 6 of the program's previous 12 participants returned regularly. The steep attrition rate is mostly explained by counterprogramming—five of the six students who departed were cast in the spring play, and one student joined a music appreciation club. Even after Greenberg switched L4C at RFK's meeting day from Monday to Tuesday in order to accommodate the spring play's rehearsal schedule, cast members rarely, if ever, returned; L4C attendees reported that their actor friends needed to catch up on homework on Tuesday afternoons. Due to these modest attendance rates, the survey was not readministered at the end of the program, and therefore pretest/posttest comparisons of identity, skill perceptions, and comfort levels could not be made. Instead, thematic analysis was applied solely to the instrument's open-ended items,

Photographs

Finally, participants themselves often chose to snap photographs of their friends' scene work; these images, along with Felt's, also became part of the corpus.

L4C at RFK

Students were excited about improvising from the get-go. During his recruitment talks, Greenberg had informed attendees that he had worked with such actors as Dan Castellaneta (who voices

Homer Simpson on the popular animated show *The Simpsons),* and had directed at the comedy theater where Tina Fey and Steve Carell—stars of the hit movie *Date Night,* which many students had recently seen—had learned their comedy craft. Rather than just name-dropping to impress the students, Greenberg was illuminating improv's relevance and showing how it connected to their own pop culture.

Building Trust and Safety

Greenberg built on this initial excitement by creating a safe space where participants could play. The establishment of a safe space is critical for improvisation. Participants must trust that their fellow players will respect their contributions and support their journeys. This bedrock of safety empowers participants to imagine and enact their ideas boldly and supports them in accepting their peers' ideas appreciatively. In order to create a safe space, Greenberg had to confront participants' perspectives on discipline, shifting their pejorative views of it so that they saw it as a necessary ingredient for their growth as actors and citizens. Greenberg also needed to show participants that, rather than being based on a lone teacher dispensing "knowledge" in a top-down fashion, this program's pedagogy involved everyone discovering and sharing lessons together through participatory engagement.

Greenberg started the first session of L4C at RFK the same way he introduces all new students to improv: with a round of "Mirror." In this game, students work in pairs and, using simple movements, create mirror images; one student initially leads while the other follows, and then they switch. As Greenberg circulated among the pairs, offering comments (or "side-coaching"), he reminded the players, "You do your best work by making the other person look good." This exercise in focus, teamwork, shared responsibility, caring, and fun imparted an immediate understanding of what the program was all about. Greenberg and his team of L4C Comedy Mentors model this game and others on the L4C website, http://www.laughterforachange.org/videos/games-we-play/.

 Next, Greenberg sat down on the floor alongside his students and modeled a game that requires focus, observation, and creativity. In this game, each player interacts with imaginary (or "space") objects—a common device in theater games. Object work provides a fun opportunity for players to share their own imaginings, support others' ideas and, consequently, build connections. As Spolin explained in "Space Objects Commentary (Making the Invisible Visible)," a section in the handbook accompanying her *Theater Game File* (1975):

> The teacher who has goals to reach and subjects to teach rarely has time or energy to allow inner feelings or thoughts to emerge. Workshop space object games/exercises assist in uncovering the hidden self. Objects made of space substance should be looked upon as thrusts/projects of this (invisible) inner self into the visible world. In effect, then, the invisible ball thrown to a fellow player … is an aspect of a player's sharing and connecting

with the fellow player who accepts and catches the invisible ball. When the invisible (not yet emerged, inside, unknown) becomes visible, seen and perceived—theatre magic! Recognition of this added dimension of the world brings excitement and refreshment to all (p. 25).

Greenberg asked each student to create a small space object (such as a watch or a hat), place it in an imaginary box, and then pass the box along to the next player. In order to minimize fear of failure as well as express the ethos of improv, Greenberg repeated at that time (and throughout the program—as he had ever since the beginning of his career in improvisation) that "There are no

Figure 3. Participants listen to Greenberg on the first day of L4C at RFK.

mistakes."

Each member of the group embraced the exercise, introducing such space objects as ear buds, a necklace, and a used tissue. In rapt silence, the whole group watched intently as one by one their peers took their turns. After everyone had had a turn, Greenberg added a challenge: Open the box, remove a fellow player's object, interact with it, and then throw the object to its owner. The cumulative efforts of four volunteers resulted in 100% completion of the exercise—every object was recalled and returned.

Across every game, Greenberg invited participants to try things out, praised them for their efforts, and encouraged them to support their peers through attentive listening and appreciative applause. As the participants acclimated to L4C's method, Greenberg also asked participants for their help in managing discipline and realizing the program's full potential.

Sara, a strong leader and passionate actor, commented on the workshop's culture of trust and safety during her end-of-semester interview. "Well, I've enjoyed how everybody is nice in their way and you work together, cuz pretty much what improv is, you know, is just going along with what comes up," she said. "And I learned that it's not only you that makes the improv work but also teamwork. You're supposed to work as a team and make your partner look good as well. And it's very nice, working with a bunch of people." Then she smiled.

In her interview, Kim, whose timidity seemed to dissipate over time, also spoke to the trust and safety that she experienced. But rather than emphasize the support between players as an example of that, Kim focused on the respect that instructors showed their students:

> I enjoy working as a group, working with the teachers, how they help us with acting, how they talk to us. They're not like, 'No, you have to act this way,' no. They let us be, but in a way that you're supposed to be, like, in the process… It's different cuz here it's more like a free place, a place where you can sit, chill, and also act, have fun, have a laugh, work. And in other classes it's more like, 'This, this, this,' and 'Stop laughing,' or 'That's not funny.' And here it doesn't have to be funny, you just have to improv and just make it happen.

Figure 4. Helena, Grant, and Bennett cut loose. (Helena was delighted when Greenberg informed her that the symbol on her sweatshirt came from a movie created by improv-trained actors, writers, and directors.)

Taking Risks, Being Themselves

Greenberg consistently encouraged the students to bring their whole selves into their play. He invited students to investigate imaginary spaces through recreating playground games and sports activities that were familiar to them and to set improvisations in the environments they knew best, such as their homes and neighborhood stores. He requested that they create characters based on relatives, neighbors, and friends. As they played roles from parents speaking rapid-fire Spanish to clerks checking their cell phones, participants represented their community.

The results of this identity-driven work were always valuable. Most of the students' scenes were funny and entertaining, and even the less successful scenes demonstrated courageous risk-taking and created teachable moments. Because praise rather than criticism was emphasized during the workshop, the students enjoyed themselves as they learned. They also were empowered as the creators and definers of the playing/learning space.

At the end of the fall semester, Bennett reflected, "When I first began, I was more reclusive, but doing improv has brought out the natural side of me that's just fun and out there, that just likes to have fun." Said Helena, "I just liked the games we played because they just take your shyness away, cuz you have to just get up, just be yourself, and just let it out. And it feels good."

Over time, the students practiced and became more adept at the use of space objects, articulating objects' dimensions with more precision and respecting the integrity of immovable features, such as counters or doors. More importantly, with this regular opportunity to freely share their imaginations, they began to take more risks with what they chose to share. For example, during the second month of the program, Greenberg asked the students to demonstrate what they wanted most by engaging with a space object. Shy, quiet Kristina hugged a phantom figure in space, disclosing that the thing she yearned for most was a best friend. This was a brave admission, especially because her peers had expressed desires for material items such as consumer electronics and plane tickets.

Kristina again displayed her newfound bravery when she chose to play a male character, and a sexist macho man at that. That was especially remarkable because improvisers of all ages and experience levels commonly choose to play characters of their own gender, and the precedent set by other students in the workshop certainly followed those norms; only when compelled by the structure of a game would participants "gender bend."

Figure 5. Stacia grins from the car's passenger side as Kristina, playing the role of a macho male driver, blatantly "checks out" Helena's character.

It's not hard to understand why improvisers tend to make this choice; not only is it easier to identify with characters more like yourself, but when you play them, you also avoid appearing "unattractively" and/or "inappropriately" masculine or effeminate. For adolescents in particular, who have a pronounced need for peer acceptance (Erikson, 1959), jeopardizing image is a serious matter. Yet in her guise of a chauvinist behind the wheel, Kristina boldly ogled Helena's character,

Figure 6. L4C Comedy Mentor Kat and participants Grant and Katie crack up.

a girl working at a car wash. Whether Kristina's choice solely indicated her self-confidence or also expressed an interest in gender hierarchies, sexual power, or identity exploration is impossible to say. It may even have demonstrated what she had learned about comedy performance—specifically, that playing the opposite sex virtually always amuses the audience. In any case, Kristina reaped the rewards that her originality deserved: appreciative laughter.

At the end of fall semester, Kristina said, "I used to be a lot more shy and then with this program—this is actually like extra help for me, to get out my shyness and to help me with my classes. Because of the games, I'm like one step ahead… I feel more confident."

Figure 7. Leon and Greenberg improvise together in an imaginary car.

Colearning

Throughout the program, Greenberg would often participate in activities alongside the participants, joining them in the joy of play. Once the students had gained confidence and sufficient trust in the group dynamic—crucial steps in the creation of safe space—he allowed outsiders to observe the program's process. Greenberg encouraged these visitors to learn by doing rather than sit in judgment from the audience; perhaps motivated by the ethos of the program or the energy in the room, every visitor accepted his invitation. Their participation decentered traditional power structures as the youths were the experts and the adults were the novices. In these contexts, attendees of all ages learned on their feet, treated scene partners as equals, and played together, embracing permission to be silly and just have fun. This destruction of traditional hierarchies, particularly where teachers and students are concerned, can be liberating for both parties. For adults and youths alike, this experience can also facilitate great understanding of a generation other than one's own.

Figure 8. L4C newbie Flora, veteran Stacia, and adult visitor/improv novice Rick wait for their trio's turn to perform.

Figure 9. During their visit, two members of USC's Project New Media Literacies play a pair of bank-robbing mice.

Figure 10. Biology teacher Larry works with L4C improv peers, all of them high school freshmen.

Figure 11. RFK students, along with theater arts teacher Toffler, energetically play improv game "Bunny Bunny" in L4C's improv workshop.

Spooky Stories: Showcasing Identity and Interrogating Safety

As confidence and trust continued to grow, students increasingly chose to share their own stories, recalling ghosts they had seen or voices they had heard. The storytelling also may have been a method for working through feelings about fear and safety, as the neighborhood where the participants live is a high-crime area. Greenberg encouraged them to use these spooky stories as the basis for improv scenes and skits. In the program's safe space, they could transform their anxiety into laughter.

Figure 12. Three participants reenact a peer's ghost story. Katie looks on from the wings as Tina, upstage, laughs at Helena's exaggeratedly dramatic death.

Figure 13. Participants Bart and Karlos share a grin during a scene.

Results

Becoming More Proficient in Improvisational Theater

In terms of their desired take-aways, most survey respondents articulated theatrical goals, e.g., learning to project their voice, obtain a broader view of acting, and master the craft of improv. The nature of the participant pool (all theater arts students) might explain this technical focus.

Karlos, a faithful participant (see Figure 13), had gained a reputation for regularly dissolving into giggles, speaking with his hand covering his mouth, and struggling for prolonged periods to find the "perfect" thing to say. But to the survey question "If you were part of the program last semester, what have you gained already from participating in this improv class?" Karlos wrote, "I've been able to actually go up and do things in front of an audience." Although he still had not wholly conquered his tendencies to laugh or to stall when all eyes were on him, Karlos revealed his own pride and progress. In her end-of-semester interview, Kim also explained the advances she had made toward this goal. "I think that now I could stand in front of an audience, even though it's scary, but I could actually talk and not be, like, fainting there, and I could actually speak, and act, and have a good time."

Applying Their Learning Beyond the Program

In their end-of-fall-semester interviews, several participants described how their behavior had changed since the start of the program in what Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) term "real-world situations" (i.e., those outside of improv class). Said Helena, "I think I participate a little more. I used to be like this [tucks her chin and hides her head behind a curtain of hair]. Now in class I can actually speak up for myself." In addition to describing himself as "more confident" and confessing, "I like to participate more now," in his interview Bart identified cognitive gains. "It [improv] helps me when I'm in the middle of something, like when I'm stuck, it helps me to think quicker, think of whatever I have to think of … It's taught me to think outside—I use the same strategies outside."

Some participants also disclosed a desire to own and apply these skills more broadly—for example, by becoming more comfortable with speaking in public. In her survey, Helena echoed her sentiments from the end of the first semester, writing, "I am more involved with group discussions." This response suggests that Helena used the program's safe space to practice airing her thoughts and then transferred this expressive skill to a relevant context. Such an outcome is precisely what L4C hopes to support.

Personal and Social Growth

Still other survey respondents revealed their deeper understanding of improv's gifts. Three returning students identified "self-confidence" as their goal; another wrote that his was "creativity." Three other returning participants mentioned combating shyness or fear. The

responses of two participants concerned the social implications of personal growth. For example, in his interview Bennett said simply, "I feel like an example." One of the new students wrote in his survey that he hoped "to become better at what I do as a person and know I react to what others do."

Finally, other participants focused solely on their social gains. Returning improviser Tina hoped to gain "a broader view of teamwork." In his end-of-semester interview, Bart said that one of the things he enjoyed about the program was meeting new people. Returning participant Stacia wrote in her survey, "I really like the way I can work with my friends like Helena, Leon, or Kristina because it makes the scene much MORE COMFORTABLE! :D"

Fun Forever

Importantly, throughout this rich experience, the fun was never lost.

Figure 14. PLAY! research assistant Felt claps for Katie, Tina, Helena, and Leon, caught giggling at their own antics.

During their respective interviews, Bart mentioned "the fun—the games are fun," and Kristina said, "Some things I've liked about it [improv workshop] is the games, like Freeze Tag and those games, and how we perform our little skits. And I like how we're always together and we have fun." To the survey prompt "Please share any additional comments or feedback on this improv class!" participants almost universally chose to respond and, in their answers, mentioned fun:

I love this class, the members, and the whole concept of it. A great experience.

I like improv Class !!! ^.^

It is really fun.

This improv class is very fun and I hope they keep doing it.

I love it, great class and shown me many things.

I think it's a good class (:

I love improvisation! Keep it going guys. You're the BEST!

Awesome!

I like improv class!

THIS IS AWESOME! Much more to learn :)

In her interview, Kim summed up this sentiment by saying, "I want improv class to be more long."

Conclusion

L4C at RFK provided youths with a safe space to build trust, explore identity, learn along with peers and adults, develop theatrical skills, and grow as individuals and citizens. Crucially, this learning occurred within the context of play. In the current climate of high-stakes testing, labor and funding battles, and perceived peril (real and imaginary) around every hallway and virtual corner, providing space for play is perhaps the most subversive—and rewarding—gift we could offer youths.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

1. What have you enjoyed about improv workshop?
2. How, if at all, do you think you've changed from the first day of improv workshop to today?
3. What goals do you have for next semester in improv workshop?
4. What would you change about improv workshop—to improve it or just to switch it up—next semester?

Appendix B

	0 Not at all	1 Slightly	2 Somewhat	3 A good deal	4 Extremely
1. Do you have what you consider an active imagination? Do you consider yourself to be a shy person?					
2. Are you good at using your imagination in an active way to solve problems?					
3. Do you find it easy to speak or perform in front of a group?					
4. Do you consider yourself to be a playful person?					
5. Do you tend to see the humor in things?					
6. Do you consider yourself to be a creative person?					
7. Are you good at finishing things that you start?					
8. Do you consider yourself to be self-confident?					
9. Does fear of failure make you avoid taking on tasks or challenges?					
10. Do you make friends easily?					
11. Are you comfortable working in group situations?					
12. Do you consider yourself to be a good listener?					
13. Is it easy for you to communicate your ideas with others?					
14. Are you accepting of others' ideas and opinions, even when they are different from your own?					
15. Do you find it easy to pay attention, even when the subject is not interesting to you?					

16. What do you hope to gain from this improv class?

17. If you are a returning student, what have you gained already from participating in this improv class?

18. Please share any additional comments or feedback on this improv class!

Thanks for your help! Now let's play!

Enhanced Participation: Creating Opportunities for Youth Leadership Development
Clara Waloff

The term "leadership" appears frequently in the language and literature of youth development, and for many after-school programs it is one of many expected developmental outcomes for youth. What characterizes youth leadership development? What do youth participants identify as its key elements? Turning to youth who have been identified as leaders, this article looks at what they have to say about their own experience as emerging leaders.

Working in the youth development field, I saw many examples of participation in after-school programs that involved more than merely showing up, and I began to think about youth development and leadership in terms of enhanced participation. Through interviews, focus groups, and one in-depth arts and research project, youth and alumni from a community-based organization in New York City shared their ideas about leadership development, which are supported by a body of literature about youth development. These young leaders were in high school or college or were out of school altogether. For many, their status as older youth allowed them some perspective on their experience as emerging leaders. One older alumna could compare her current views on leadership development to those she had held several years before. As I listened to her and the others, a number of questions arose for me regarding the implications of leadership for youth in community-based settings:

- What is the potential and what are the challenges for community-based youth organizations in fostering and sustaining youth leadership development?
- What experiences do youth have in the process of emergent leadership development? What can the adults around them learn from those experiences?

Research Notes

The research for this essay was conducted at a community-based organization in New York City ("El Centro")[1], where I worked from 2005 through 2013. El Centro is rooted in the people, culture, and issues of the mostly Latino neighborhood in which it is embedded. Its mission is to develop leadership in a context of community development and social justice.

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[1] The names of all organizations and individuals used in this essay have been changed. Many of those interviewed chose their own pseudonyms.

Youth Development and Youth Leadership Development

For many organizations, development is a goal that is part of a range of expected outcomes[2] for youth participants. The Search Institute's "40 developmental assets" model provides youth development practitioners with a common language and is divided into internal and external assets and subcategories such as "support," "empowerment," "boundaries and expectations," "constructive use of time," "commitment to learning," "positive values," "social competencies," and "positive identity" (2007). Often, youth development is often framed as growth on a personal level, as young people move "further along on the spectrum from where they started" (J. McGoughlin, director of Youth Programs at the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services, personal communication, November 5th, 2010). For many youth leaders, alumni, and mentors, the aim of youth leadership development is connected to the aims of youth development. If development is an overall goal in working with youth, so that every young adult experiences personal growth and change, then leadership can be understood as the ultimate goal of that development.

Beyond Showing Up—Enhanced Participation in Leadership Development

Out-of-school organizations are uniquely positioned to cultivate leadership development among their participants because their programs can offer opportunities for enhanced participation, a concept that refers to the deep involvement that youth can experience in programs like El Centro. In their own words, the youth I spoke with described it as participation involving more than "just showing up." This can take different forms and will be discussed further below. Common elements include participation that

- develops voice and identity;
- allows for development of relationships with peers and adult mentors;
- provides opportunities for decision-making and problem-solving; and
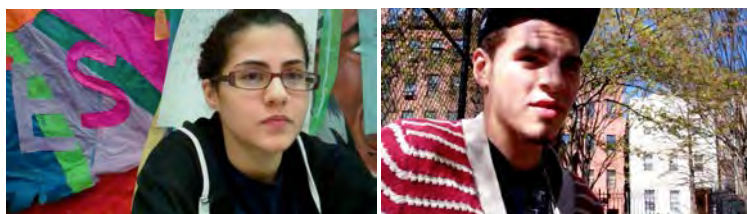- encourages involvement in real-world settings and connection to community.

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[2] In the *Afterschool Youth Outcomes Inventory*, the Partnership for After School Education (PASE) published a set of expected outcomes for out-of-school youth programs. Included in the "Social and Emotional Outcomes Inventory" section are outcomes such as "improved communication skills," indicated by both "effective expression of thoughts and feelings" and "increased assertiveness in social context" (PASE, 2013, p. 8). Another expected outcome is "increased leadership and civic engagement," indicated by both "increased ability and interest to lead others or activities" and "increased awareness of issues that impact life and community" (2013, p. 10). In "Confronting 'The Big Lie': The Need to Reframe Expectations of After-School Programs," Halpern, a staunch advocate for such programs, makes the case that their appropriate role is to provide opportunities for youth to grow in developmental tasks in such areas as "creativity, aesthetic sense, self-expression, interpersonal skill, sense of agency and voice, identification with home and community culture, individuality and relatedness, compassion, and physical vitality" (2006, p. 112).

When the youth who are discussed in this essay reflected on being deeply involved and having ownership over their experiences, they began to talk about themselves in terms of leadership.

At organizations like El Centro, becoming a leader is embedded in a context of community and social development. This idea is not unique. In Experience and Education, Dewey wrote about education that provides "continuity" to a wider community (1938). While youth development can focus on individuals, the larger goal of youth leadership development at organizations like El Centro is preparing young people to tackle real-world problems and create change in their communities. At El Centro, many youth characterized their leadership development in terms of community activism, referring to marches, rallies, political hearings, and campaigns in which they had taken leadership roles. Many spoke of participating not only in activities organized by adults, but also in initiatives based on issues that they and their peers had identified.

Developing Leadership Through the Arts

For many youth at El Centro, the arts are an entryway to leadership development. They made the case that participation in the arts can lead to personal and social transformation when it provides opportunities for the exercise of one's voice, creativity, original thought, imagination, and power. They illustrated that through high-quality and high-engagement experiences in the arts, they could develop their voices and identities, connect their own experiences to those of others, imagine realities beyond what they saw before them, and ultimately find opportunities for leadership.[3]

Alicia and Ben in the winter of 2012

I interviewed Alicia and Ben, two recent alumni of El Centro, together in the fall of 2009 and separately in the winter of 2012. The arts provided solid ground for both of them to develop a positive self-image and their identity as leaders in a program where they had the freedom to do so and where adults had high expectations of them. Both Ben and Alicia had returned in different capacities to the organization, but—like many of the youth I observed at El Centro—essentially neither of them ever really left it. Both started a youth dance crew when they were members and have continued with the group. Alicia became a paid staff member in a program at El Centro that she attended when she was younger. She and Ben continue to be members of arts ensembles that put on productions at the organization, and both

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[3] Shernoff is an excellent resource for looking at youth experiences in terms of participation; see "Youth Engagement in After-School Programs: A Perspective from Experience Sampling," which describes research on middle school participants' experiences in after-school programs (2008).

describe their leadership development as unfolding hand-in-hand with their development in the arts. Alicia commented, "When it comes to me, El Centro basically started it all. I came when I was six, that's when I started with the arts. As I got older, that's when I started learning about leadership."

Thriving as a Path to Leadership

In my interview with Alicia and Ben in 2009, Ben described his experience with theater. He was working intently with the drama instructor, ultimately writing and performing a one-man play. In 2012 he described several experiences that contributed to his ability to thrive in the arts. The concept of thriving, especially as it relates to success in school, is frequently discussed in literature about youth development (Benson & Scales, 2009). Through the arts, youth leaders at El Centro made clear connections between being able both to thrive in areas of their own choosing and to find opportunities for leadership in them. In the course of a year, Ben was cast as the lead in El Centro's annual professional production in celebration of Three Kings Day, won a citywide championship with his dance crew, traveled to South America to present his work in dance with a group from El Centro, and wrote, directed, and starred in a play about the death of his uncle in the World Trade Center attack on September 11, 2001. In each of these experiences, Ben positioned himself (intentionally or not) in a leadership role. In organizing and mentoring younger members of his dance crew, galvanizing his peers into performing in his play and then coaching and directing them in it, being a role model to his peers and younger performers in the Three Kings Day celebration, and representing youth and community in a delegation to South America, Ben was identified as a leader by adults and his peers, and ultimately by himself.

Opportunities and Outcomes of Enhanced Participation

What does it take for someone like Ben to develop into leadership roles? This next section looks at the conditions that enable such a trajectory. In the literature and databases of out-of-school programs, youth are often referred to as participants. This status is easily achieved; youth can sign up for a program or be signed up for one and then simply show up. But they may also have opportunities for enhanced participation, where they invest in and have power over their development. The youth I interviewed referred to many outcomes of enhanced participation that contributed to their leadership development, including experiences of speaking up, voicing opinions, and feeling that they are or have become "outspoken." They also pointed to opportunities for enhanced participation in public speaking and facilitation of workshops and presentations and speak of having a choice in activities and programs and power in decision-making and problem solving and over their experience in general.

Opportunities for enhanced participation are facilitated by adults who work with youth. Outcomes of enhanced participation are recognized by youth and adults as the results of those opportunities. Opportunities for and outcomes of enhanced participation that contribute to leadership

development both depend on effective youth-adult partnerships (Petrokubi & Zeldin, 2006)—relationships between youth and adults where power is shared (Eames-Sheavly, 2007).

For many of these youth at El Centro, becoming a leader entailed losing some of the self-consciousness associated with putting themselves "out there." Several I spoke with described moments when they stopped worrying about what their peers and adults thought of them. They referred to occasions when they were faced with deciding whether to speak up in the midst of a conflict and ultimately did so because of a feeling that, as one said, "If I don't do this, no one else will." This perception is exemplified in Anastasia's comment:

Anastasia in the art class, 2010

After I started participating more and speaking more, that's where everything started happening a little more. It's okay to be the quiet person, but if you're not really in there, and you're just in your own world, and not really expressing yourself, also to get ideas—but sharing ideas, you're kind of in a closed block. You're blocking yourself from a lot of things at the same time.

Anastasia is another recent alum of El Centro who became part of its internship program.[4] She has not always been recognized as a leader, and she has had a long journey in identifying herself as one. She joined El Centro's after-school program as a freshman in high school. She was quiet and kept to herself, talking only to her small group of friends and finding an outlet in visual art. During high school, she became recognized for her artistic skill and the contributions she made through her visual art. More recently, she had become increasingly recognized for her leadership capacity, emerging as a strong voice in group discussions and decision making, respected as a counselor among her peers, relied upon by adults to inspire other youth and accomplish the tasks she sets out to do, and participating avidly in visual arts opportunities both within and outside of the organization. How did Anastasia transform from a quiet observer into an active initiator? What conditions enabled her to develop as a leader?

El Centro Interns at school closings rally and hearing, winter 2012

[4] El Centro interns are high school, college, and out-of-school youth who take leadership roles in various activities and community-organizing intitiatives.

And what can her perspective on her personal trajectory tell us about the nature of youth leadership development? While her journey is unique, it has similarities and connections to the stories shared by a number of youth leaders. "I can't keep waiting and depending on somebody else to do something. Sometimes you're just gonna have to step in and do something yourself," Anastasia said; Alicia stated, "My opinion does matter. That's what I learned here. And I would think, if my opinion matters here, it matters anywhere."

Many youth described coming into leadership reluctantly. Ben commented:

> Everybody sees me as some type of a leader. I find it hard to believe! People look at me and say Ben…they put me on such a high pedestal, I'm not gonna say I don't understand why, I can see, but I don't think it's such a big deal. As far as [my dance crew]…there's no established leader…But for some reason, when it comes to decision making, it always comes down to me and Alicia. Everybody relies on me and Alicia… It's crazy…I'm like, we're a group, we're a family, we're supposed to make decisions together. But they feel like when they're stuck, they have to rely on me and Alicia. Inside it feels good, but at the same time, I want them to progress as leaders as well. That's why with some situations that come up, I try to ask them what they would do. And I try to get their opinion and I try to get them to lead, instead of just having me and Alicia. If they just rely on me and Alicia, they're not going to learn for themselves.

Ben's recognition of the responsibility that comes along with leadership is significant. His desire to foster leadership in his dance crew members was shared by many emerging youth leaders. Mulan, another intern at El Centro, also reflected on her leadership development:

> El Centro has helped me be more expressive…As a leader, you need to be able to express yourself. We do a lot of public speaking…That was a real point when I felt growth. I don't know if that is leadership? But I know it was definite growth…[M]y mentor, she put me through a lot of tough situations…I would say, "I don't want to do that, I don't want to speak, get someone else who likes to talk." Because of that, I taught myself, you gotta do it. Now I'm not afraid to talk in public, I don't hold back when I feel like I need to say something.

Mulan's recognition of her own growth and development is reminiscent of other youths' reflections. For the entire group of interns, using their voices, especially in public speaking, has been a core indicator of leadership development.

Working on issues with real-world implications is another powerful experience for youth. Alicia referred to a campaign against a nuclear waste site that posed a severe threat to the community. Alicia recalled going to rallies as youth and said, "[W]e spoke from our experience." Asked whether they were received differently because they were young, Alicia responded, "Yes, I think we made

more of a statement. It's not only the adults showing concern, it's also the kids. That should say something." In describing her dance crew's involvement in a citywide competition, Alicia talked about connecting the arts to issues that affect people personally. The crew started out with a focus on dance but ultimately saw the possibility of using dance to bring attention to gang violence an issue that affected everyone in the crew and many young people in the community:

> If it doesn't affect you personally, you're not really going to strive to make [it] happen. We all felt like we needed to discuss what was going on around us, what we feel like is a big issue. Because if we all want to change it then, in agreement we can make it work. People will see that we really want to change this. And seeing how serious we are, they will be serious as well, and support us.

Imagining a different world is not always enough. For Alicia's crew, embodying the conflicts and issues they were addressing and expressing those images in dance, and connecting to an audience were important steps in taking a lead in making change in their community.
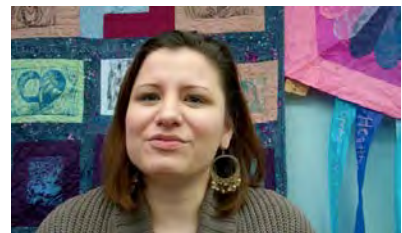
Peer Support and Safe Space to Develop as a Leader

How do youth get to the point of being able to use their voices and make important decisions? Having a safe space to participate fully, express one's ideas, and speak freely is big part of leadership development. Anastasia described how peer support helped her become more outspoken:

> When you start to participate, start talking about things, and start helping out, start doing a lot of other stuff, you're getting your ideas out there but at the same time, you're getting new ones from other people...When you do that you get to know other people, you get support from people. And this is how a big circle of trust or friendship [is formed].

Rose, an alumna of El Centro and a site director in the organization at the time of my study, described the experience of having a safe space when she was a youth as something that occurred on a regular basis, which created a unique culture for emerging leaders:

Rose in the spring of 2012

And before you know it, we're having a safe space...So much came out of those meetings. People would cry, half of those people I'm still friends with because of the relationships and the openness that we had with each other, because we had space for that. We always did activities to have compassion for each other. We had all of those experiences every day. It all helped me figure out what I wanted to bring to the programs when I came back to El Centro.
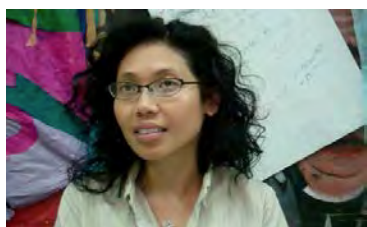
In a focus group conducted with El Centro interns, Adam, a new intern but a longtime El Centro member, emphasized the peer support characteristic of the group:

> One thing I like about being a leader in a group is that we all support each other. You see Zero is always trying to be in the background, but one day we are going to push her up there! Go speak Zero! It's gonna happen! It happens to all of us. One thing a leader should do is encourage other leaders to lead.

Montgomery, in his second year as an intern, was hesitant to label himself as a leader. But while speaking in the focus group, he identified aspects of his leadership training that he had already used in the dance crew he was in with Alicia and Ben:

> In a way, El Centro supplies me with these…tools to keep my crew together. We use the same sort of techniques that interns do. Like in my crew, everyone's a leader. But there's no one set leader. Everyone has an opinion and we give them that chance to voice it, the same way we do in the interns group…Being a part of the interns group is slowly helping me develop my skills as far as becoming a leader. I don't feel like a leader sitting here, but I guess I am in my own little way.

It was often difficult for these youth leaders to describe themselves in those terms. And in many ways, they talked around that idea—identifying moments when other people looked to them as leaders (Ben), identifying moments when they felt challenged and moved outside their comfort zone to voice their opinions (Mulan and Anastasia), and identifying moments when they used those leadership skills in other contexts (Montgomery, Alicia, and Ben).

Magdalena in the spring of 2012

Magdalena, the director of El Centro's internship program, pointed out that many in it do not readily see themselves as leaders:

A lot of them, they don't identify themselves as leaders, they haven't even taken an opportunity to reflect that, "Oh, I've had this growth from when I used to be like this," until someone else points it out to them.

When interns exemplified leadership, Magdalena would explicitly call their attention to it. While many were hesitant to call themselves leaders, they could nonetheless clearly identify and talk about times when they spoke up, used their voices, expressed their opinions, facilitated a program, and stepped up when it was uncomfortable to do so—all elements of enhanced participation that lead to youth leadership development. Magdalena's point that it often takes someone else to point out one's leadership development is consistent with the reflections of many youth.

The Nudge Factor: Mentoring Relationships as Opportunities for Enhanced Participation

> *They need a BIG imagination. They need to have high self-esteem, and put their mind to it, because if they don't—see, El Centro just gave us that push. And it brought us there. But people that don't have programs like this, it's hard…they need that extra push. (Ben)*

A recurring theme expressed by youth at El Centro (which is also supported in much of the literature about youth development) was the impact of relationships with caring adult mentors. The words the youth used in speaking of the adults' actions—like "push," "nudge," "support," and "challenge"—all indicate the importance of mentoring in establishing and upholding expectations. At organizations like El Centro, mentoring relationships are developed intentionally by adult staff members and sought out by youth. In interviews with youth, alumni, and mentors, the idea of growing as a leader with the support and encouragement of a mentor emerged as quite significant. Several youth described experiences of taking on mentoring roles as a part of becoming a leader, and indicated that mentoring itself was strong evidence of leadership. Anastasia commented:

As a leader you have to have an open mind about things. Sometimes you have to sit there and listen. Sometimes it's OK to let other people make their mistakes. Because by being a leader you have to let them learn to make their mistakes, but also, how to fix them. I think that is a big part of being a leader, and for someone to teach someone else how to be their own leader. A leader is not just about being a leader for everyone, but also helping others to be their own leaders, and to figure their own steps.

Alicia described the mentoring relationship she started to develop with the young people she worked with this way:

> They have a little [dance] crew, and…they were going through some problems. They asked me how [my crew] does it, and I said that "You guys are picking a person who is in charge," Even when someone steps up to do certain things, we all come to an agreement. I want to be there for them, because I want to see their group progress. They were talking about quitting, and I said, "Together you are a family, and you guys shouldn't quit on each other."

Essentially, Alicia was coaching this next group of leaders in the skills of collective leadership. In Alicia's experience, leadership entailed mentoring leadership in others, listening, and synthesizing a community's desires.

Many youth commented that they felt cared for and supported by adult mentors. Alicia noted that being at El Centro felt like being in a family and contrasted that with her experience in school, saying, "In school, teachers are teachers, you can have a relationship with some of them…when you come to El Centro, everybody knows everybody [and] [e]verybody is looking out for

everybody." In *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education,* Noddings describes the importance of such relationships: "At every stage we need to be cared for in the sense that we need to be understood, received, respected, recognized" (2005, Page xi). She also writes about caring being "relational" and "mutual" (2005).

The youth also acknowledged that they felt accountable to their adult mentors. For Rose, developing strong relationships with adult mentors when she was a young person at El Centro was an arduous process. It took a lot of positive reinforcement for her to see leadership qualities in herself.

> [Y]ou don't know it when you're in it. I didn't think, "I'm a leader." If you asked my mentor, she would agree. One day, all the young people were complaining about something, but they were only complaining to me. I was upset because then I would be the only one to say something, and I would get into trouble. I told my mentor, and someone else pulled me to the side and said, "You know, you have leadership skills. You are a leader here." I said, "I don't want to be the leader, I didn't ask to be a leader!" They just told me, "Rose, you might not think you are a leader but you are. You can either use that power to do something good, to promote justice, or use it to persuade negativity." That stuck with me after that. I guess leadership and people looking up to you is not your choice. And sometimes you have to embrace that responsibility. From then on I looked at things differently. When my peers did complain to me, I tried to figure out with them how we could voice our concerns and negotiate certain things. So when growing up, people may tell you "You are a leader," but you really won't understand what that means until you go through your own experience.

Magdalena emphasized that part of the role of mentoring in leadership and in all youth development is providing opportunities for reflection and assessment:

> If there are different levels of leadership, then how far someone gets and having the awareness of it—"I'm emerging into something"—knowing that versus not knowing that, will either [encourage] you, or you'll resist…I think unless the leadership is guided and there are opportunities to assess and reflect, like, "Oh I did that, or how could I do that better? I didn't do that so great. That's a weakness, how do I work on that?" it doesn't allow the enhancement to be as enhanced as it could be in regards to their participation as a leader or a bystander.

Putting Enhanced Participation into Practice

How can after-school educators provide opportunities for enhanced participation? The following is an account of a project that engaged young people not only in the creation of art and expression of their voices, but also in the ongoing reflection and study of the work they were doing and the effect it was having on themselves and others. In the fall of 2010, curious about young people's

perspectives on their experience of creating art, I brought the idea of a participatory action research[5] project to high school students in the visual art class at El Centro. I was particularly interested in how youth saw themselves developing as leaders (something that the adults around them recognized and aimed for) and as the creators of art for social change (another goal of the organization).
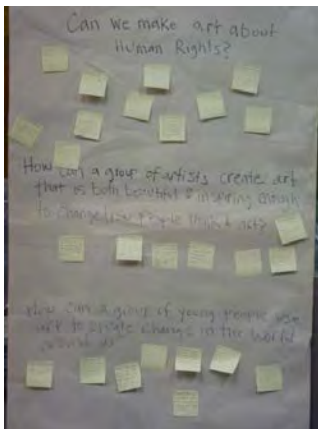
The participatory character of the project emerged naturally from a class discussion. Andre, one of the members of the visual art class, mentioned that the video class had worked on a project about human rights and asked, "Can we make art about human rights?" What follows is a paraphrased account of the discussion that ensued:

> Andre: We should do something like that in here.
> Jessenia: You're trying to make this like social studies! We're not in school!
> Anastasia: That sounds like history.

I then asked the group why they thought we had started the semester by making maps about our lives. If this was an art class, why didn't we just start by drawing?

Post-it note Inquiry Wall, fall 2010

> Anastasia: So we can learn from others' experiences and understand our own better.
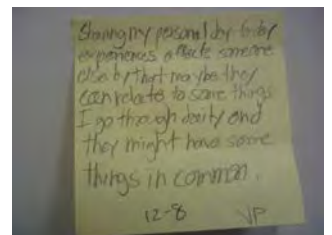> Clara: So El Centro is not just about making pretty art.
> Jessenia: It's about social art.
> Clara: Can we do both?

By the end of the class, we had generated three questions and written them on a large piece of paper on the wall:

1. Can we make art about human rights?
2. How can a group of artists create art that is both beautiful and inspiring enough to change how people think and act?
3. How can a group of young people use art to create change in the world around us?
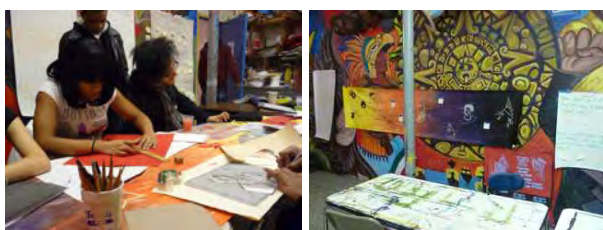

Post-it note response to question # 2, fall 2010

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[5] Social psychologist Orlando Fals-Borda was one of the creators of participatory action research (PAR). He and others used PAR as an "alternative paradigm" to classic subject-object research (Fals-Borda, 1987). They aimed to turn the power imbalance of subject-object research on its head in their quest for social justice and transformation. PAR relates directly to the principles of the Education for Liberation Network and the work of Paulo Freire, whose "see, analyze, act" methodology was a cornerstone of Catholic liberation theology in Brazil in the 1960s (Freire, 1970). The work of Augusto Boal (who built upon Freire's work) and of Luis Moll is also connected to PAR (see Boal, 1979 and Moll, 2010).

As the semester continued, students added Post-It notes with responses to these questions to this ongoing "inquiry wall," which reflected significant changes in the participants' thinking. The wall served as a group journal, with ideas developing for everyone to see.

Individuals who initially answered "no" to "Can we make art about human rights?" later described how their answer changed to "yes." They pointed to changes in their responses on other occasions throughout the semester and explained how various experiences had altered their thinking. From October to December, members of the art class visited museums, art galleries, and community murals around New York City to see examples of art that inspired social change. They also created their own artwork with that same goal. Providing support for ongoing reflection, engagement in posing and answering questions, and discussions among the class members—all part of the PAR process—is one model for involving youth in enhanced participation in an arts class.
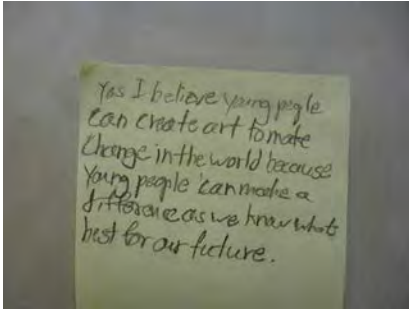
Starting with Self, Connecting to Others

One of the most salient ideas that emerged from the youths' research was that to inspire change, they had to create artwork that people would relate to. The identification process started with youth in the class making art that told stories about their everyday lives. Sharing "what they went through" every day, members created works of art that examined their own lives and made connections to each other. They highlighted this as a critical step in creating transformative work. Aesthetics educator Greene writes that finding meaning in artwork is a collaboration between artist and audience that creates a personal and shared experience (2001). Essentially, she argues, we can understand our own experience better by learning and understanding the experiences of others.

Members of the art class at El Centro, fall 2010.

In "Mobilizing Culture, Language, and Educational Practices: Fulfilling the Promises of Mendez and Brown," Moll refers to "funds of knowledge," a concept with pertinent connections to sharing one's life experience (2010). He describes the "mobility of knowledge" acquired informally at home and in neighborhoods, through families, language, and culture and characterizes these "funds" not as liabilities but as assets that are part of the makeup of the whole individual. The youth's engagement in participatory action research revealed similar funds of knowledge. Responses to the questions that the class had generated at the beginning of the study included "We can use art to create inspirations, emotions, expressions that people can see and feel and want to be the reason of change and support it," "They can draw what they see going on in the world around them," "Create from your heart. Draw about things that are really important to you and that you yourself want to see changed," and "It starts with the message that you are trying to send into the world. If the message is powerful enough, people will listen." The youth increasingly referred to the use of their voices as the project continued.
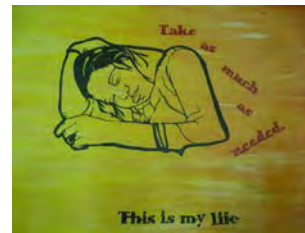
Post-it note response to question # 1, fall 2010

In "Curriculum as Window and Mirror," Style describes students becoming windows and mirrors to each other—sharing and understanding personal experiences as well as identifying with what is shared, as the youth in the visual art class did. "If the student is understood as occupying a dwelling of self," she writes, "education needs to enable the student to look through window frames in order to see the realities of others and into mirrors in order to see her/his own reality reflected" (Style, 1996, Page 35).

In "Critique: Where Art Meets Assessment," an article about a youth audio documentary program that used in-depth, youth-led assessment processes, Soep discusses the importance of youth having control of their experience and describes the "commitment to creating conditions that allow students to serve as producers and judges of their own development" (2005, page 40). She underscores the significance of youth taking part not only in the creation of work but also in analyzing the impact of the experience on themselves personally, as a community, and as a society at large (2005).

In this inquiry project, it was critical to engage youth not only in creating art but also in research and reflection. Both aspects contributed to powerful revelations about youth leadership development. As artists, authors of a study, and the ones who pose the research questions, young people are put in decision-making and problem-solving positions. In "From Voice to Agency: Guiding Principles for Participatory Action Research with Youth," Rodriguez and Brown address the significance of providing youth with opportunities to participate in action research: "[T]he realities of their lives were used as bases from which to investigate and build more complex theories about their own and others' schooling experiences" (2009, page 26). The authors also write that the youth participants began to see "their own experiences as worthy of serious investigation and their knowledge as legitimate" (Rodriguez and Brown, 2009, page 26).

Artwork created by youth in the visual art class, fall 2010.

Conclusion

What a simple and powerful idea: to work with youth toward the notion that their experiences are "worthy of serious investigation" and that "their knowledge is legitimate." In essence, that is what providing opportunities for enhanced participation means. Out-of-school organizations cannot create youth leaders, but they can create spaces and opportunities for youth to come into their own power and potential.

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