

Enacting Literacies of Power in School: Identifying Challenges, Iterating Instruction

Purposes

This study explores how to support English teachers in amplifying the voices of historically marginalized student populations via literacies of power (Morrell, 2005). To do so, we studied the design of a Solutions Journalism (2019) unit, wherein students researched a local problem and proposed a solution through their senior capstone project, a TEDTalk. Our team, two university-based researchers (Authors1 & 2) and a teacher-researcher (Author3), takes up the charge for participatory methodologies that support classrooms as sites for curricula that empower youth in civic engagement for social change.

Our study explores the following research questions:

How do students enact literacies of power during a senior research project?

How does the teacher design and implement an instructional unit to support students enacting literacies of power?

Theoretical Framework

We frame our study within critical literacies pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008; Freire, 2005), which repositions marginalized populations as agents of change who, through literacy practices, can question, critique, and transform oppressive social structures. Viewing classroom learning as a “practice of freedom” (Coffey, 2015, p. 6) matters in urban schools where empowering pedagogies are most needed, yet least often practiced, amid pressure to reach achievement outcomes (Coffey, 2015).

We recognize the importance of a practitioner’s voice and lens in working toward “humanizing literacy education” (Morrell, 2009, p. 99), which develops academic skills

alongside social critique and advocacy. Together, we endeavor to support youth literacies by building a unit around their concerns, priorities, and solutions (Haddix, Everson, & Hodge, 2015).

Methodology

Our design-based research (Barab & Squire, 2004; Reinking & Bradley, 2008) began with identifying unit-level pedagogical goals; we then collaboratively study and iterate instruction to achieve them. Our goals are: 1) for students to explore solutions to a local or hyperlocal issue that affects them or their community, and 2) for students to advocate for change by producing and sharing digital media messages.

Phase One of this study took place during implementation of the Solutions Journalism in both sections of Author3's 12th grade Journalism class at Hamilton High School, a 6-12 grade urban school in a mid-sized Northeast city. Data collection encompassed unit implementation for approximately seven weeks (Spring 2019). Phase Two of data collection was scheduled for the same period 1-year later, but has been postponed to Spring 2021 due to COVID-19.

Data Sources

The following data collection activities have yielded the corresponding sources:

- Participant observation – field notes
- One-on-one interviews with students – audio recordings, transcripts
- Artifact collection – curricular documents, instructional plans, student work
- Weekly Zoom planning meetings – audio recordings
- Final reflective conversation – audio recording

Data Analysis

Following Erickson's (1986) analytic induction method, we are collaboratively developing and testing assertions based upon repeated readings of the data corpus. With our understandings of powerful literacies serving as sensitizing concepts (e.g., advocacy, voice) (Blumer, 1954), Authors1 and 2 make initial assertions, then return to the data to search for confirming and disconfirming evidence to revise, strengthen, and/or reject assertions before presenting them to Author3 for further refinement. As analysis continues, we will be writing narratives for assertions that survive testing.

Data to be Shared

We are pursuing two assertions:

1. Our partnership allowed us to identify challenges students faced in enacting powerful literacies during the unit (see left-most column of Table 1).
2. Our partnership facilitated real-time and long-term iterations to expand the unit's potential to address these challenges (see other columns).

Table 1

Challenges and Iterations to Solutions Journalism Unit

Challenge	Real-time iteration	Long-term iteration
Focusing big issues (e.g., hunger) into local issues (e.g., food waste at a local grocery store)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapting a brainstorming lesson Adding conference time with adults to help define/refine problems (Students confirmed the conference time was essential for them.) Scaffolding peer conferencing so that students could rely on each other and work independently Using an interim writing assignment to motivate defining and localizing problems 	Embedding the practice of taking a big issue and making it local into the previous course unit

Maintaining research stamina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding inspiration (e.g., a classmate's progress, TED Talks by youth) • Sharing examples of other youth advocating for a cause (e.g., Emma Gonzalez video). • Mind mapping that helps students see the connections between their problems/solutions and their classmates' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using current year's final TEDTalks as exemplars • Practicing speaking in front of a camera earlier in the year
Aligning problems (concrete, abstract) with means of advocacy (logistical, educational)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole class reading and discussion about types of advocacy • Conferencing with teacher 	Matching exercise or interactive wall to revisit types of advocacy best suited to types of issues
Skill-building for success in the unit (e.g., public speaking, sustained writing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedding multiple opportunities/assignments to speak publicly before class • Practicing timed writing, progressively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adding a unit between previous unit (World Poverty) and Solutions Journalism unit to build competencies • Scaffolding skills throughout the year

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