

Running Head: ACCESS POINTS

“I’m about to really bring it!”

Access points between youth activists and adult policymakers

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Abstract

Adolescents under 18 who wish to influence public policy face a basic contradiction: although they experience and interpret the policies made in their name, they have few formal channels for political participation (Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003). This contradiction is symptomatic of the broader, entrenched problem of age segregation in the United States (Rogoff, 2003). Activism groups, however, give youth opportunities to participate in local democratic decision-making venues, such as school board meetings, city council meetings, and other community forums. Political encounters such as these represent concrete *access points* for youth. In this paper we analyze these access points as learning environments for young people. Drawing on observations of thirteen encounters between youth activists and adult policymakers, we first describe four features of these learning environments: public goals, high stakes performances, authentic tasks, and academic discourse practices. Second, we draw on notions of adaptive expertise (Hatano & Oura, 2003) to analyze variations in performance by youth participants. Attention to these access points is important because such experiences give youth the opportunity to marshal academic skills in the service of meaningful, public goals.

On May 28th, 2003, members of Youth Rising¹, an activism group comprised of African American and Asian American high school students, organized a press conference and rally to mobilize support prior to their presentation to the school board in a mid-sized city on the West Coast. Youth Rising had written a “student power” resolution calling for greater student participation in school governance. After the rally the group and its supporters filled the first five rows of the auditorium where the school board meeting was to be held. Youth participants took the microphone and shared the results of surveys they had conducted with almost 1,000 of their peers. Findings included the fact that only 26 percent of respondents felt that they could talk to school counselors about personal issues and more than two-thirds of students wanted greater involvement and voice at their schools. Youth Rising called for stronger student councils that would work on “real issues – not just planning proms.” The school board president expressed his support, publicly saying that he would vote for the resolution, and asked that his colleagues do so as well.

Afterwards, in interviews, Youth Rising members expressed surprise that the school board members had listened to their concerns and supported the resolution. One student, Denise, described her experience at the hearing:

So how did you feel about how that presentation to the school board went?

I think we did good! When we was still out there he [the Board President] was like, “So, I agree.” And he was looking around like, “Who else is going to agree...?” You know? So I think we did good.

So you felt like they were listening to you guys when you were talking up there?

¹ All names of organizations and individual people are pseudonyms.

Yeah. Finally. And that's why a lot of people were...saying "Oh my god, I'm being listened to!...I'm about to really bring it!" Me personally, I was like, "Oh, are they listening to me? ...I'm not even going to shut up." You know? That's how I was. I was like, "I'm finally being listened to. I might as well say everything I've got to say and not hide no words."

Denise's excitement about the opportunity to speak at the hearing underscores a basic contradiction that confronts adolescents: they are developmentally sophisticated enough to understand and negotiate complex public systems (Larson & Hansen, 2005), they are capable of sustained commitment to battling entrenched public problems (Cervone, 2002), and they experience and interpret the consequences of policies made in their names (Fine & Daiute, 2003). But they have few formal channels for political participation (Zeldin, et al, 2003). This contradiction is symptomatic of the broader, entrenched problem of age segregation in the United States (Rogoff, 2003).

Given this problem, school board meetings, city council meetings, and other community forums offer some of the few constructive public channels through which young people can transgress age segregation and contribute their voice to political decision-making. Political encounters such as these represent concrete *access points* for youth. We define access points as organized encounters between young people and adult policymakers in which young people share their views on policy issues.

In this exploratory paper we analyze these access points as learning environments for young people. First, we describe these learning environments in terms of four features: public purposes, high stakes performances, authentic tasks, and academic discourse practices. These different features comprise a hybrid setting that resembles

some characteristics of school classrooms and youth organizations but is also wholly different. Second, we draw on notions of adaptive expertise to analyze variations in performance by youth participants (Hatano & Oura, 2003). Access points provide opportunities for young people to marshal academic skills, such as evidence-based argumentation, strategic thinking, and persuasive speech, in the service of community-oriented goals. In this sense, descriptions of access points challenge binary distinctions between “school” and “the real world” and reveal the creative ways that young people make use of multiple discourses to advance meaningful goals.

Literature Review

Age Segregation

Researchers have noted the phenomenon of “age segregation” in the United States, in which minors have few opportunities to interact collaboratively with adults (Heath, 1999; Schlegel & Barry, 1991). As Rogoff et al. (2003) write, “Instead of routinely helping adults, children are often involved in specialized child-focused exercises to assemble skills for later entry in mature activities” (p. 181). The structural organization of high schools typifies this phenomenon—despite adolescents’ need to find a place in society, current practices offer few opportunities for internships or apprenticeships in real world activities outside the school walls (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Brown & Theobald, 1998).

Age segregation extends to the civic realm. In many ways teenagers are accorded the status of children: they cannot vote and they have few opportunities to take part in decisions in their schools or neighborhoods (Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003). Moreover, the United States is one of two countries that have not ratified the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which calls for basic rights to participate in decisions that influence their lives. Youth of color, in particular, contend with negative representations in the media and limited opportunities for democratic participation (Checkoway et al., 2003; Hart & Atkins, 2002). And yet, as Erikson (1968) suggested, adolescence is a time of heightened idealism and concern for finding a place in the world. Teenagers reflect on their surroundings and are capable of hypothetical reasoning (Damon, 1983; Kohlberg, 1976). One response to this stage-environment mismatch between opportunities for participation and adolescent capabilities is youth activism.

Youth Activism

Youth activism refers here to activities in which adolescents, usually with the support of adults, identify a public problem and try to solve it through advocacy or community organizing. The target of these groups' activities is often a local decision-making body, such as a school board or city council. In contrast to community service programs where youth clean parks, tutor children, or serve food to the homeless, youth activism groups seek to influence public policy or change institutional practices (Boyte, 1991; Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). Activism groups in poor and working class neighborhoods have organized campaigns to improve failing schools, performed action research to expose environmental polluters, and persuaded policymakers to stop the building of "super jails" for juvenile offenders (Cervone, 2002; Sherman, 2002, Kwon, 2006). In this sense they embody a critical form of civic engagement, in which youth are encouraged to question the status quo and envision better alternatives for themselves and their peers (Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2003; Watts & Guessous, 2006). Such

groups turn familiar social constructions of urban youth—as alienated from civil society or, worse yet, dangerous—on their head (Youniss, 2005).

Prior research has documented the political accomplishments of youth activism groups (e.g., Kwon, 2006) as well as the developmental benefits associated with participation in activism campaigns (Larson & Hansen, 2005; Gambone, Cao Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe, & Lacoë, 2004). Few studies, however, have focused specifically on settings where youth encounter adult policymakers, such as at school board meetings, city council meetings, or other kinds of community forums.

Sites for Enacting Democracy

School boards, city councils, and other local governance agencies are sites where democracy is enacted and made real. As Tracy and Muller (2001) explain in reference to school board meetings:

School board meetings...are quintessential sites of democracy in action:

loosely knit groups of people, with partially shared and partially competing interests, making decisions about how to educate their community's children. The content of school board decisions, cumulatively and over time, shapes the character of American society.

Even more important than the decision content is the character of the decision-making process. *In the specifics that comprise the communicative process of school board meetings, democracy is lived out (or challenged)*

[italics added]. (p. 85)

It is in school board meetings, and other decision-making venues, where the character of a society is formed and people enact democracy. The actions that citizens take in such

meetings can be construed as expressions of the behavior that the group considers to be appropriate, natural, or acceptable (March & Olson, 1995). Certain discourse practices are expected if one's voice is to be successfully heard. For example, to be persuasive in such situations people may need to support their opinions with empirical evidence or frame their message to a particular audience.

What is noticeable about the statement by Tracy & Muller (2001), however, is that it identifies school board meetings as places where adults make decisions about and for children. It is rare that young people themselves have opportunities to participate in these decisions. The same can be said of other powerful institutions, such as media organizations and city councils, despite recent calls to increase youth participation in school and community governance (School Redesign Network, n.d., Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006).

In this paper we call attention to the potential value of these settings as learning environments for youth. The theoretical perspective we employ draws from recent conceptions of hybrid learning environments and “third space.”

Theoretical Lens: Hybridity and Third Space

A hybrid is something that is of “mixed origin or composition” (American Heritage Dictionary, 2001). Hybridity theory draws attention to this aspect of everyday experiences—in today's global world, people navigate between various types of knowledge and discourse practices as they try to make sense of things and participate in various social practices (Lee, Gutierrez, & Warren, 2005; Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo & Collazo, 2004). As Moje, et al (2004) explain, hybridity can apply to many different constructs: the bringing together of knowledge and discourse practices;

one's sense of self and how one enacts identity; and the creation of spaces and relationships.

“Third space” is a term that has been used in diverse disciplines to refer to hybrid contexts that transcend either/or binaries (Moje, et al., 2004). In educational research, for example, it has been used to describe a bridge or a scaffold from marginalized cultures, discourses, or practices to a more privileged academic space (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999). According to this approach, classroom teachers should try to build on children's prior knowledge, sometimes called cultural “funds of knowledge”, as a vehicle for helping students develop disciplinary forms of reasoning (Lee, 1995; Moll & Whitmore, 1993). What results, in optimal cases, are classrooms where diverse forms of knowledge and discourse are honored in order to foster deep, authentic learning for students.

For this paper we draw on the notion of “third space” to help us understand access points for youth. Specifically, we view these access points as hybrid environments in which distinctions between “everyday” and “academic” forms of knowledge are reconfigured in powerful ways. In contrast to accounts of third spaces in classrooms where everyday knowledge is treated as a resource to accomplish academic ends, in democratic access points this relationship is reversed: academic tools are strategically employed in the service of purposes meaningful to youth, such as improving their schools or neighborhoods.

Methods

Data Collection

This paper is based on our analysis of thirteen “access points,” defined as organized encounters between youth under 18 years of age and adult policymakers. See Table 1 for a list of the types of access points included in this analysis. These access points represented the culmination of projects or campaigns organized by youth to accomplish various public goals. A total of seven groups were observed. Five were based in non-profit organizations, one was a school-based club, and another was a Social Studies class. Of these, six groups were comprised of a majority of students of color; one group was comprised of European-American GLBT students and their allies.

-- Table 1 here --

In order to document these encounters we used both video (for four observations) and narrative field notes (for nine observations). In addition to these observational data, we conducted more than 300 hours of ethnographic observation and 45 interviews with youth participants from four of the groups. These observations and interviews helped us understand how encounters with policymakers related to the broader context of youth activism campaigns and how youth interpreted the encounters. We also analyzed program artifacts associated with the events, such as newsletters written by youth or handouts prepared by adults.

Data Analysis

The claims presented in this paper are derived from a two-step process. First, we each conducted studies independently of each other that analyzed youth activism groups as contexts for learning and development. Geil (2005) analyzed presentations given by two groups of youth at a school board meeting, in which the presentations received very different responses from board members, in part related to how the youth delivered their

messages. Prior work from Kirshner examined forms of social positioning of youth that took place in public meetings between Anglo adult policymakers and Latina youth as well as adult assistance strategies that enabled young people to organize complex activism campaigns (Kirshner, 2005; Nasir & Kirshner, 2003).

One result of this line of work was that both authors noted that interactions between students and policymakers comprised intriguing settings quite unlike typical interactions either in schools or in youth organizations. Our next step was to collaboratively reanalyze our data in order to understand the learning opportunities that became available when youth activists encountered adult policymakers. We focused on two research questions: What were the distinguishing features of interactions between youth activists and adult policymakers? What did it look like for youth to develop expertise in this domain?

In order to identify features of access points that held true across sites we began by developing a comprehensive list of rituals and routines that we observed in these settings. For example, we noted that it was common for youth to rely on written scripts when making their comments. After we had developed this list, we examined the extent to which these descriptors held true across observations and also what kinds of variations there were. This led us to a reduced set of features that appeared to be constitutive of access points. While performing cross-case analyses to confirm and disconfirm these features, we observed that some features resembled typical practices in traditional school classrooms while others resembled typical practices in youth organizations and reform classrooms. This analysis contributed to our interest in the concept of “hybridity” and “third space” as tools to understand these access points.

After identifying common features in these settings we sought to identify what it meant for youth to become competent actors in their encounters with adult policymakers. We drew on expert-novice distinctions to assess variations in youth's performance. In order to evaluate student performance we drew on a combination of our own judgments as well as the responses of adult policymakers. For example, some students successfully engaged adult policymakers in back and forth discussion, whereas others struggled to respond to adult questions or criticisms.

Access Points as Hybrid Learning Environments

Access points refer to those settings where youth encounter adult policymakers, such as school board members, newspaper editors, and city planners. In the following sections we describe four common features of these access points. First, they were motivated by a *public purpose*. Second, the interactions were *high stakes*, in the sense that there were tangible consequences for youth participants and they involved public speeches to unfamiliar audiences. Third, learning opportunities were *authentic*; they emerged out of youth-driven goals and required interactions with experts in the domain. Fourth, students appropriated *academic discourse practices* in order to be persuasive.

Public Purposes

Youth's interactions with policymakers were motivated by public purposes. In the thirteen encounters we observed, youth sought to increase financing for their schools, increase leadership opportunities for students, improve the images of youth of color in local news outlets, reduce military recruitment in public schools, create a safer climate for GLBT students, create more recreational opportunities for children in low-income neighborhoods, make their schools safer, stop the war in Iraq, and provide free bus passes

for low-income youth. As these examples suggest, their goals had a social justice dimension to them – youth leaders sought to address problems stemming from educational inequities, discrimination, or economic hardship facing their communities.

When asked about their participation in these groups, youth commonly invoked this sense of public purpose. Here are quotations from three youth:

I think that it gives youth opportunities to become leaders, to...actually help out in the community, as in making the school a better place or if something's not fair in the community.

Since we are community based we hear about issues and we try hard to fix them, or we try our best to fix them.

It seem like we just try and make stuff fair. We try and speak for people who can't speak. For students in school who don't have no say so, we...try and help them people.

The above quotations underscore the public purposes that youth brought to their encounters with policymakers. These goals provided a context for the interactions; other aspects of access points are best understood in light of them.

High Stakes Performances

Meetings with adult policymakers had a high stakes, performance-oriented quality to them. In one sense they were high stakes because of the consequences for those involved: they represented rare opportunities for youth to gain an audience for their concerns. As Denise said, who was quoted at the beginning of this article, “I'm finally being listened to. I might as well say everything I've got to say and not hide no words.”

Another young person, from a different group, concluded her presentation to the city council by saying,

I just want to say that finally, this was finally the time that we had to work on something, because usually all the adults make the decisions for the youth and they never hear us, so thanks for hearing us.

As these examples suggest, opportunities to share views with policymakers were rare and unfamiliar; when they did occur, youth endowed them with meaning.

Perhaps because of these high stakes qualities, students worked hard to prepare for their speeches. Similar to a dance or theatre performance, most youth rehearsed prior to their encounters with adults. Audiences ranged in size. The smallest was a meeting with four newspaper reporters; the largest was a hearing before a regional transportation board with several hundred community members in attendance. Speakers typically wrote down their thoughts on index cards or pre-written scripts. Often adult mentors coached them on their speeches prior to the meetings. In one group adults organized role-playing games, during which the adults played the part of hostile policymakers trying to undermine the youth speakers by asking them random questions or purposefully misinterpreting their statements. Students in this group learned how to stay “on message,” keep their composure, and respond to unanticipated comments from policymakers (see Kirshner, 2006 for further discussion). This practice of “rehearsal” is similar to what students might be expected to do in the classroom, if they were preparing to give a speech, presentation, or a performance. In this case, however, their performances had public consequences, in contrast to the private consequences associated with receiving an individual grade.

Authentic Tasks

One manner in which these access points were “authentic” is that they enabled youth to learn new skills in the service of solving meaningful, consequential problems. In this sense, learning opportunities had high “use value” rather than “exchange value” (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). In interviews students described learning competencies that they did not learn in school, ranging from general skills such as long-term planning and public speaking to more specific ways of looking at the world or taking on social problems. One student said, “I’m seeing the world at a completely different angle now.” When asked what he meant, he said that he had heard about racial discrimination from his teachers, but didn’t believe it until working on this project. Another contrasted his group with school by saying, “The school is going to teach you the good side of everything, but up in here, they going to show you the good side, the bad side. They going to show you all four corners of everything.” These comments suggest that working in these projects exposed young people to ways of seeing the world that was more expansive than what they had encountered in their school classes.

These tasks were also authentic in that they embodied ill-defined problems subject to the contingencies of the real world (Larson, 2000). For example, one group persuaded the school board to endorse its student leadership resolution. But while waiting the required two weeks for the school board to vote, the district was taken over by a state administrator because of a multi-million dollar budget deficit. Students then had to recalibrate their strategy in light of this unexpected event. This example underscores the complex nature of the problems that students were trying to solve, and the lack of

obvious solutions to them. This open-ended, ill-defined, complex quality to the problems, while challenging, also made them authentic.

Finally, youth's participation in access points was authentic in the sense that they were assessed, but these assessments were quite unlike those common in schools.

“Authentic assessment” refers to practices where learners demonstrate mastery of skills that are used by experts in the domain (e.g., McLaughlin, 2000; Shepard, 2000). Access points provide a clear example of authentic assessment: youth participants were not assessed through grades or tests, but instead through their interactions with experts in the domain – public officials and policymakers. The consequences are real: if a student mumbled her speech, did not provide adequate empirical support for her demands, or framed the message in a way that alienated her audience, then policymakers might respond politely but with little substance.

Academic Discourse Practices

Access points privileged school-based academic discourse practices, such as speaking in mainstream English and supporting arguments with empirical evidence. For example, in several of the groups youth commonly spoke in local forms of Black Language (Alim, 2005) during group planning meetings and in their informal interactions with each other. When presenting to adults in decision-making positions, however, most switched to mainstream English. Although we did not ask young people specifically about their reasons for this decision, in our judgment it was a strategic move that stemmed from their perception that mainstream English was the discourse that would be taken more seriously by adult policymakers. Students' decision to “code-switch” across these two discourses sometimes extended to their presentations. For example, in the

following quotation, one young woman, Marlene, shared her views with newspaper journalists. She sought to make the point that her peers internalized the negative representations available on the news. In doing so, she moved back and forth between two linguistic practices.

When [youth] come to school or when they go about their day, it was like,

“Did you just hear the news? They was like, they was talking ‘about West Oakland.”

“What, somebody just got killed or somethin’?”

It shouldn’t be like that comment. That comment should be,

“What, somebody’s test scores just went up?”

Or

“Somebody just won a football game?”

It should be something positive.

In the above quotation Marlene chose to invoke mainstream English and Black English: when quoting her peers she spoke in Black English, but when speaking in her own voice, to a group of journalists, she spoke in mainstream English.

A second academic tool that youth employed in their meetings with adult policymakers was empirical evidence. Five groups out of seven conducted surveys of peers, community members, or teachers and used the results of their surveys to strengthen their messages to adult policymakers. During encounters with policymakers youth explicitly referred to research they had conducted. For example, one group sought cheaper and more frequent public transportation for youth, especially for those living in a section of the city that was isolated by a freeway. To support this point, presenters shared

survey data on PowerPoint slides demonstrating that 34 percent of the residents of this neighborhood said they had a “hard time with transportation,” in contrast to an average of 13 percent for residents of other neighborhoods. Another group, seeking more resources for their high school, surveyed teachers at their school. At a presentation to the school board, one student reported:

Twenty-eight percent of the teachers do not have enough desks for every student in their classes. Many of the teachers who did have enough desks do not have quality desks. The saddest statistic of all is that eighty-five percent of the classes at Washington High do not have enough textbooks.

This use of social science research methods is an example of youth appropriating an academic discourse – one quite different than discourses in their everyday lives – for use in pursuing goals that are meaningful to them. In this sense, it resembles a third space that blurs boundaries between academic and everyday life.

Summary

Access points represented hybrid learning environments, which combined qualities of school classrooms and youth organizations, but that also had a unique character derived from their authentic, public, high stakes purpose. In the next section we begin to identify variations in student performance and what it would mean for youth to move from novice to expert in this domain.

Variations in Student Performance

As discussed in the section on authentic assessment, student performance in access points played out in real time encounters with adult policymakers. Rather than being judged on tests or papers written for private consumption, students were expected

to interact with adults and persuade them of the merits of their cause. Youth's styles of participation in these policy settings varied considerably.

Appearing Fluent in Academic Discourse Practices

We observed that youth's performances in these access points influenced how their message was received. Some students gave the impression of being natural and fluent, even while giving a rehearsed performance. Other students struggled through their presentations, as if they were reading from a script that they had not rehearsed enough. As Sawyer (2001) has argued, much of what people say, even in an unscripted conversation, consists of structures or catchphrases, but failing to give the impression of being natural and spontaneous can imply distance or inauthenticity (Sawyer, 2001). This issue was observed in the following example.

At a school board meeting in a large, urban, public school district, two student groups made presentations. Both relied on pre-written scripts, but the first group, consisting of European-American students arguing for stronger policies to prevent discrimination against GLBT students, faculty, and staff, appeared comfortable speaking in a public environment. They looked up, made eye contact while they were speaking, and did not stumble over their words. After their presentation, they were congratulated by the board, and assured that their resolution would be endorsed.

The second group, a social studies high school class comprised of Latino/a students, presented results of surveys they had analyzed regarding a lack of resources at their school. As a class, the students had written a script for their presentation and took turns reading parts of it. Few made eye contact with the board; several stumbled over words and phrases; and others, for whom English was not their native language,

mispronounced some words. After the presentation, two board members questioned the authenticity of the second group's presentation. One said, "What you each read, did you write the thing that you read. Did you write the words that you you wrote...Did you write, what you read to us tonight?"

Multiple factors shaped the differential outcome of these presentations, such as the types of requests being made, the different ethnic composition of the two groups and the schools they represented, as well as the fact that the board had requested a presentation from the GLBT group. We focus here on the apparent privileging of White or mainstream English language practices by members of the board, and their suspicion that use of such practices might signify that Latino/a youth had not authored the report. (In a sense the students were caught in a double-bind, because if they had spoken in everyday forms of language they might have been marginalized for other reasons). But, we also point out that if the students in the second group had demonstrated greater fluency in their presentation, school board members' reason for questioning that youth were the authors would not have been available.

Adaptive Expertise

Another quality that differentiated student performances was when speakers departed from prepared scripts. Some students adhered to their scripts when speaking to adults and had difficulty responding to unexpected questions or comments. On the other end of the continuum were students who treated the event as an open-ended interaction. These students spoke extemporaneously and responded creatively to adult arguments. Comparison across cases suggests that youth were most persuasive when they departed from scripts and responded flexibly to the situation, which forced adults to respond

directly to what they were saying rather than remain a passive audience. To help illustrate this contrast, we draw on the distinction between routine expertise and adaptive expertise. While routine expertise reflects the ability to complete a familiar task effectively, adaptive expertise reflects the ability to not only complete familiar tasks, but also respond flexibly to circumstances and adapt to new situations as they arise (Hatano & Oura, 2003). We present the following examples to illustrate this difference and underscore the potential learning opportunities that ensue from advanced performance in this domain.

One of the groups, Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL), organized a campaign called “Don’t Believe the Hype” to respond to the overwhelming number of negative portrayals about youth of color from their neighborhood in local print and televised news. Participants conducted focus groups and then worked in small groups to produce a magazine, website, and video to promote their goals.

In the episode discussed here, five student members of YELL and two adult staff members met with a team of four editors, journalists, and interns from a local newspaper to discuss the problem of media representations. Students drew on academic forms of expression to make their points – they presented results of surveys, a content analysis of local newspaper articles, and written poetry. These academic forms of expression were meant to show the effect of media stereotypes on young people of color. Members of YELL hoped to persuade the newspaper, in particular, to cover more “positive” stories about their school and neighborhood and not to always focus on the “negative.”

In the next sections we contrast the performance of two students – Arun, a Cambodian-American male in his first year with YELL, and Marlene, an African-American female in her second year. Each student had been responsible for a different

part of the project: Arun had designed and conducted a survey of 48 youth and adults in the neighborhood about their views of media stereotypes and Marlene had helped edit a magazine that included a variety of articles intended to combat negative images. At the beginning of the meeting with the journalists, both Arun and Marlene presented their work as they read from written scripts. Their performance varied, however, in response to questions and comments from their audience. Whereas Arun struggled to depart from his script, Marlene persuasively responded to an editor's comments.

Arun: Routine expertise. Arun made a one minute presentation describing his work on a survey about the problem of stereotypes. He described how he had surveyed 48 people total and then written a short article about his results. He concluded by saying that the article "showed how people feel about stereotypes and are aware that they're being stereotyped. And they just want me to show positive things about their community. Um, that's about it." When Arun had concluded, a journalist asked him about the specifics of his data.

Journalist (J): Can I ask a question?

Arun: Yeah

J: How many...Did you ask the people if they, watch the news, read the newspaper?

Arun: Yeah.

J: And what'd they say?

Arun: They did.

J: How often did they?

Arun picks up a copy of his report and begins looking through it, as if the information is there.

YELL adult director: I don't think we asked that.

There is a brief silence, then the journalist proceeds to talk about why he thinks it is important to know if the survey respondents actually read the news.

In the above excerpt, the journalist asked a question about the type of evidence that Arun had presented. This question required Arun to depart from his script. Arun, in response, misled the reporter about the nature of his evidence. It may be that this was an "honest mistake." Regardless, Arun struggled to adapt to the demands of the situation. Once the encounter became unscripted, he declined to participate further.

Marlene: Adaptive expertise. Later in the same meeting an editor responded to criticisms voiced by youth about the practice of publishing stories about homicides. The editor gave a lengthy defense of this practice, in which she suggested that the worst culprits of sensationalism were the television newscasts rather than print news, and also that it was more respectful to the victims to write about their plight than to consign it to the back pages. She concluded by saying, "That was our philosophy behind that series."

Without missing a beat, Marlene responded to the editor's comment by speaking for over two minutes. First she acknowledged the editor's points about TV stations and that negative stories are sometimes important to publish. She recognized the demands on the newspaper to make money. But then she responded with new arguments of her own, focused on the idea that youth internalize negative coverage of their community and that positive coverage would inspire them to succeed. She concluded by saying,

Marlene: When they [youth] hear the news or the media...the first thing they think, the first word out of their mouth should not be something negative about themselves, because they should always think about themselves highly, and never below anybody. But, we do, and that's reality, because we don't think we can make it. And a lot of the teens that you talk to don't think they're going to make it to 25, and it shouldn't be that way.

Journalist: No

Marlene: That's all I'm going to say.

Marlene employed three rhetorical moves that effectively captured her audience's attention and moved the encounter to a new level of discussion: she acknowledged what policymakers had said, introduced new points in response, and framed the issue in terms of a moral issue that adults and youth could agree on: "It shouldn't be that way." In this sense Marlene showed greater comfort in departing from the script than Arun. Marlene's performance reflected what others have called "adaptive expertise" (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000; Hatano & Oura, 2003) – she was able to respond flexibly to the circumstances, she was able to improvise, and she was able to deal with a new point that had not been anticipated when the group was preparing for the meeting. Although she may not have been a true "expert," she demonstrated sophisticated and skillful performance.

Discussion

Results discussed in this paper were organized into two sections. First, we identified four features of access points: public purposes, high stakes performances, authentic tasks, and the privileging of academic discourse practices. We argue that these

qualities constituted a hybrid environment that partly resembled school (in its privileging of mainstream English and academic forms of argument) but was wholly different.

Unlike typical school classrooms, students were motivated by collectively determined, public goals. Also, the campaign tasks closely resembled authentic learning opportunities typical of workplaces or project-based youth programs.

In the second section we analyzed two types of variation in student performance. Whereas almost all students used prepared scripts to present to adult policymakers, some students demonstrated greater fluency in academic discourse practices than others. Also, although some youth struggled when the situation called for improvisation or unrehearsed participation, others deftly departed from their scripts and responded to unanticipated questions, criticisms, or comments from adults.

One limitation of this study is that we do not have interview data from all of the youth participants focusing on their interpretations of these events, nor did we have the opportunity to interview adult policymakers who took part in these encounters. Such data would give us a deeper understanding of participants' interpretations of these interactions. This limitation stems from the fact that our original studies were not designed with the intention of studying these encounters, it was a goal that emerged after completing data collection.

A second limitation relates to generalizability. Six of the seven groups were populated primarily by students of color who lived in working class and poor urban neighborhoods, and who attended public schools whose achievement rates fell below state and national standards. This demographic data is relevant because these students lived in communities that had been marginalized politically and engaged in struggles

related to educational equity and economic justice. Although one group did come from a majority middle class, European-American school, we do not have enough data to know how experiences of these youth may have varied systematically from the others. Findings from this study, therefore, may be less likely to generalize to the experiences of young people in other social contexts.

Despite these limitations, we hope this analysis of access points can generate helpful ways of thinking about learning opportunities for young people, particularly for linguistic and cultural minorities. In this discussion section we discuss theoretical and practical implications of our study.

Strategic Adaptation in the Third Space

Current research focused on the interplay between everyday and academic discourse practices calls for the creation of “third spaces” for learning. These third spaces move beyond binary divisions between everyday and academic to formulate learning environments where everyday funds of knowledge are treated either as resources for developing academic competence or as tools to challenge the notion that academic discourses, such as forms of scientific reasoning or literary interpretation valued in schools, represent the sole form of legitimate knowledge or truth (Lee, 1995; Moje et al., 2004; Moll & Whitmore, 1993; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004).

Our study of encounters between young people and policymakers has presented a slightly different kind of “third space.” Rather than draw on everyday funds of knowledge as tools for learning academic concepts, young people used academic discourses as tools for advancing social and political goals. We call this phenomenon *strategic adaptation*, because it involved adaptation to mainstream discourse practices,

but in a strategic, provisional manner. Policy settings, such as school board meetings, city council forums, or even legislative offices, have their own valued ways of talking and interacting (Tracy & Muller, 2001), much like other discourse communities (Gee, 1996, Moje, 2000). The youth leaders and activists we observed sought to participate in these settings in ways that would allow them and their goals to be taken seriously. They had larger ends in sight, such as reclaiming positive images of youth of color or making schools more engaging and equitable. To accomplish these goals youth activists strategically adapted to language and forms of argument recognized by policymakers. Some were also able to adapt to unexpected situations by departing from scripts and improvising.

This notion of strategic adaptation contributes to a longstanding practical dilemma faced by educators who seek to recognize the funds of knowledge of cultural and linguistic minorities in academic contexts. As scholars such as Delpit (1986) have cautioned, progressive approaches that draw on the native fluencies of urban youth may be well-intentioned, but they risk depriving these same youth of practical skills. Many urban youth are highly skilled in forms of story-telling and self-expression that are encouraged by progressive educators, but they need to master standard forms of expression that will enable them to function successfully in “the halls of power.” At the same time, however, educational researchers working with culturally diverse populations have shown that strict adherence to narrow, Eurocentric forms of academic knowledge not only risks alienating students but also ignores the legitimate and generative ways of knowing that students bring to problem-solving (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999; Lee, Gutierrez, & Warren, 2005; Rogoff, 2003).

The forms of strategic adaptation that we observed, which treated mainstream academic practices as tools to further social justice goals, suggest an alternative way of viewing this dilemma. In contrast to accounts of third spaces in classrooms where everyday knowledge is treated as a resource to accomplish academic ends, in access points this relationship was reversed: academic tools were strategically employed in the service of public purposes. Complicated academic skills such as survey design or descriptive statistics were now situated in a broader context that gave them meaning, which in turn appeared to motivate youth to learn them. The academic skills were no longer an end in themselves, but rather a means to a larger end.

Critics of this notion of strategic adaptation might argue that it does not go far enough in challenging the hegemony of mainstream English as the “natural” or “privileged” form of speech in public decision-making settings. Critics might also wonder if youth’s own everyday or cultural funds of knowledge are devalued in the effort to adapt to mainstream discourse practices. Our point, however, is that young people chose to use policy discourses in particular settings, but that they did not give up their culturally specific identities or reject discourse practices common among their peers. On the contrary, several groups made extensive use of youth cultural practices such as hip hop music and graffiti to build support for their campaigns among their peers, consistent with findings in other research about youth activism (Ginwright & James, 2002). Also, decisions about campaign goals were based on youth’s own insights (i.e., funds of knowledge) about problems facing their neighborhoods and schools. It is true, however, that groups did not attempt to transform the normative discourse practices of these public spaces, which is perhaps a project for groups to come.

Implications for Supporting Youth Participation in Policymaking Domains

Our analysis suggests that access points represent a hybrid environment with powerful learning opportunities for youth participants. But learning to participate in these settings did not happen naturally; many young people struggled when it came to formulating tangible policy recommendations or speaking persuasively to adult policymakers. Given the challenges of this unfamiliar domain, adults in youth activist groups can play critical roles as mentors and guides. Linguistic and cultural minority youth, in particular, may benefit from explicit exposure to discourse practices common to policymaking domains. We suggest that apprenticeship learning, characterized by joint participation by youth and adults as well as cycles of modeling, coaching, and fading from veterans, represents a promising strategy (Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1989; Kirshner, 2006). Apprenticeships can help youth learn how to adapt their arguments to state legislatures, newsrooms, or school boards, not to assimilate to them, but to be effective as agents of change.

Implications for Schools

Basic differences between the social organization of learning in youth activism groups and schools suggest that one should be cautious about claiming implications for schools. Drawing lessons for schools involves broader shifts in the goals and activity systems of schools and classrooms, rather than an effort to import discrete teaching strategies or curricula.

One implication stems from our effort to frame tensions between everyday and academic knowledge in means-ends terms. The political purpose of youth activism campaigns provided a superordinate goal that contextualized and organized all related

activities. We are not suggesting that teachers develop activism campaigns to organize student learning (although one campaign discussed here did begin in a Social Studies classroom). Rather, we are suggesting that greater attention be paid to goals related to community self-determination or cultural revitalization that many linguistic and cultural minority students bring to the classroom. In such a framework teachers could play a critical role in helping students master academic tools that further culturally-meaningful ends.

Our analysis of access points also highlights the value of opportunities that transgress age segregation by enabling students to participate in adult domains. Youth's engagement in their high stakes encounters with adult policymakers reflected how novel it was for them to interact with adults under conditions of respect and collegiality. We believe that teenagers will respond if schools undo barriers that separate them from participation in mature practices of their communities, whether through out of school apprenticeships or greater participation in school governance (Brown & Theobald, 1998; School Redesign Network, n.d., Estrada et al., 2001).

Conclusion

Access points provide opportunities for youth to participate in local democratic decision-making venues, such as school board meetings, city council meetings, and other community forums. They represent hybrid settings rich in opportunities for engagement and learning. Attention to access points contributes to our understanding of learning environments that develop youth's capacity for agency and initiative directed towards public ends.

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Table 1. Observations.

Types of access points	Number of observations
School Board meeting	6
City Council meeting	2
Community Forum	2
Meeting with newspaper editors	1
Regional Transportation Board hearing	1
Panel of local and federal legislators	1
Total	13