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“I’m About to Really Bring It!”
Access Points Between Youth Activists and
Adult Community Leaders

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Abstract

Working class and low-income minority youth rarely have opportunities to participate in settings where consequential decisions are made, such as school boards, city councils, or newsrooms. Those encounters between youth activists and adult community leaders that do occur represent *access points* for youth, in which young people advocate for their collective interests. In this article we analyze access points as learning environments for youth. First, employing cultural-historical activity theory, we identify participants' goals, the tools and artifacts they appropriate in the service of those goals, and the behavioral norms and divisions of labor common to access points. Second, we argue that access points provide opportunities for youth to learn skills for persuasive speech and deliberation, which are critical for robust civic engagement. We conclude by offering recommendations for how to support novice youths' participation in policymaking domains.

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In May 2003, a community organizing group comprised of African American and Asian American high school students held a press conference and rally to mobilize support for its "student power" proposal to the local school board. The group, Youth Rising, had written a resolution calling for greater student participation in school governance.¹ At the conclusion of the group's presentation, the school board president stated that he would vote for the resolution and asked that his colleagues do so as well.

In interviews afterwards, 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, "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?

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."

We interpret Denise's excitement as a sign of how rare it is for youth, particularly youth of color living in working class and poor neighborhoods, to gain a hearing with political decision-makers. Although youth are

developmentally sophisticated enough to understand and negotiate complex public systems (Larson & Hansen 2005), they have few formal channels for political participation (Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert 2003). This contradiction is symptomatic of the broader, entrenched problem of age segregation that permeates the daily lives of so many adolescents in the United States (Eckert 1989; 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 and community decision-making. Political encounters such as these represent *access points* for youth. We define access points as organized encounters in which youth meet with adult community leaders – ranging from elected representatives to school administrators to newspaper editors – to gain a voice in issues that affect their everyday lives. In this paper we wish to analyze access points as learning environments for youth. We draw on qualitative data to analyze access points both in terms of their structure as learning environments and in terms of the opportunities to learn skills for civic participation that emerge in them. Before getting to our data, we first summarize relevant research about youth activism and explain our conceptual framework.

Youth Activism

Youth activism has gained increasing attention as a way that young people to engage young people who are politically marginalized or who attend sub-standard schools (Delgado & Staples 2007; Ginwright 2007; Warren, Mira, & Nikundiwe 2008). Here we focus on youth between the ages of 12 – 18, as distinct from activism among college students. Typically such groups are based in community organizations, churches, or after-school youth programs, but in some cases they may arise from school classes or clubs. 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, often with a social justice focus (Kahne & Westheimer 1996). For example, youth activist groups have worked to improve failing schools, performed action research to expose environmental polluters, and persuaded policymakers to stop the building of “super jails” for juvenile offenders (Larson & Hansen 2005; Kwon 2006). In some cases groups provide stipends to support youths’ sustained participation. Much of the literature on youth activism in the United States has described efforts by African American, Asian American, and Latino youth from low-income communities to become collectively organized and participate in the public square, but activism is not limited to those groups (e.g., Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota 2006). Gay-straight alliances, for example, represent efforts by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) youth and their heterosexual allies to create safe spaces in schools for GLBT students (Sadowski 2007).

Our review of existing research suggests four common features of effective youth groups: they build on authentic interests, work collectively, foster participants’ sociopolitical awareness, and provide access to mature civic practices.

Authentic Interests

Youth activism campaigns emerge from struggles that youth experience in their everyday lives, such as pollution, lack of safety, and sub-standard schools (Ginwright & James 2002). Effective organizers invite youth to reflect on what they want to see improved about their environment – in short, to articulate their interests (Boyte 2004). Organizing a project around people’s self interests means the stakes are high – it has real consequences for the participants.

Collective Work

The collective focus of youth activism is one of its defining features (Youniss & Hart 2005). Participation involves a shift in focus from individual to group.

This transition occurs when youth begin to recognize that problems they experience are not simply their own (Ginwright 2007). First author (in press) observed that youth organizers commonly invoked the slogan “power in numbers” to recruit others to their cause, suggesting the formation of a sense of collective efficacy (Bandura 1999).

Sociopolitical Awareness

Many activism groups seek to develop participants’ sociopolitical awareness, which includes the ability to analyze complex causes of social problems and take action to solve them (Diemer & Blustein 2006; Freire 1970; Watts, Williams, & Jagers 2003). Such conversations may be especially relevant to low-income youth of color who have experienced a disjuncture between American ideals and their lived experiences of poverty or racism (Rubin 2007; Watts & Flanagan 2007). Adult mentors can play an educative role by asking critical questions or sharing sociopolitical analyses that depart from dominant discourses about individualism and meritocracy (Camarota 2007).

Access to Mature Civic Participation Practices

Forms of youth-adult interaction vary considerably across groups. Some groups aspire to be “youth-led,” in which case adults act simply as facilitators who help youth formulate their own goals and plans (Larson, Walker, & Pearce 2005). Other groups seek to develop partnerships characterized by shared roles and egalitarian decision-making (Camino 2005). In our own research we have found that effective groups scaffold youths’ participation in civic and political activities through interaction with more experienced youth or young adults, typical of what Rogoff (2003) *calls guided participation* (Kirshner 2008). Guidance often focuses on building skills in communication, political analysis, planning, and leadership, but we have also seen emerging interest in participatory action research (PAR) as a tool for activist groups, in which youth learn how to design research tools and collect data that helps them understand the roots of a problem (Camarota & Fine 2008).

Prior research has documented the political accomplishments of youth activism groups and analyzed them as learning environments (Kirshner 2008; Kwon 2006; Larson & Hansen 2005). Few studies, however, have looked specifically at what happens when youth activists gain access to adult policymakers. The discourse practices and participation norms in these decision-making settings are quite different from those found in youth groups or school classrooms. We contend that learning how to participate effectively in policy settings is a key skill for youth activists. In this paper we analyze access points as learning environments for youth and identify the learning opportunities they provide. Our analysis is organized in terms of two central research questions:

- What are the characteristics of access points when viewed as learning environments?
- What learning opportunities emerge for youth participants in access points?

Theoretical Perspective

To understand learning in access points we draw on cultural historical activity theory (Cole 1996; Rogoff 2003; Vygotsky 1978) and expertise theory (Hatano & Oura 2003). Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) attends to the way people appropriate cultural tools when engaged in goal-oriented activity. At its most fundamental level, CHAT views learning environments as comprised of people, working towards an objective, whose behavior and thinking is mediated by culturally specific tools and signs. Contemporary interpreters have also examined the rules or social practices in which activities are carried out and the division of labor among participants (Engestrom 1999; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejada 1999). CHAT has been employed to study a variety of learning environments outside of school, including workplaces, community programs, and peer interactions. CHAT is useful for studying access points because it places Western schooling in historical and cultural context and does not treat it as the default or best way

in which learning occurs (Rogoff et al. 2003). In section one of our analysis we use CHAT to examine access points in terms of goals, participant structures, mediating tools, and division of labor.

The CHAT perspective also informs the second part of our analysis, in which we examine opportunities for youth to learn a social science discourse and use it in the service of their social action goals. The central concept here is *appropriation*. Human action, including thinking, speech, and behavior, is mediated by culturally specific tools and signs, most notably language (Cole & Wertsch 1997). Development and learning occur as people appropriate these tools and signs in order to accomplish meaningful goals (Rogoff 2003; Wertsch 1998). For example, studies of science learning have documented how students learn to appropriate scientific terms and forms of reasoning in order to participate in scientific discourse (Nasir, Rosebery Warren, & Lee 2006). Linguistic appropriation is often strategic and adapted to the demands of specific situations, such as when children of immigrant families act as language brokers for their families (Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza 2003) or when youth from non-dominant backgrounds switch between vernacular forms of speech and forms of speech privileged in academic contexts (Carter 2005).

When applied to civic participation, there may be specific discourse practices that youth appropriate in order to gain a political voice in encounters with powerful adults. School boards and other settings have specific norms and patterned ways of communicating that come to be seen as natural or acceptable (March & Olsen 1995). By appropriating certain forms of persuasive speech youth may be more likely to be taken seriously by community leaders and policymakers. For example, Rogers, Morrell, and Enyedy (2007) described a project where high school students learned academic skills in order to promote educational justice in Los Angeles. Certain social science methods, such as oral histories, statistical analysis, and

theoretical inquiry, became tools that the critical researchers used to uncover historical inequities and gain a voice in the public square.

Appropriation is a dynamic, developmental process. It often takes time for learners to gain increasing fluency and comfort with a tool. It is typical for novice speakers, for example, to rely on available artifacts or resources, such as reading from a script or deferring to a more experienced colleague. Novices may struggle when asked to depart from a prepared script. As they gain expertise, however, learners become more creative and flexible in how they appropriate tools. The distinction between *routine* and *adaptive expertise* is relevant here (Bransford et al. 2006; Hatano & Oura 2003). While routine expertise reflects the ability to complete a familiar task efficiently, adaptive expertise reflects the ability to respond flexibly to circumstances and adapt to new situations as they arise. For example, a chef with routine expertise may know how to follow a recipe well; a chef with adaptive expertise creatively works with unfamiliar ingredients or tools (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking 1999). Learning scientists argue that the development of adaptive expertise, which is often observed in learning environments outside of school because of the more open-ended and unpredictable nature of problems found there, should be a central goal of schooling (Hatano & Oura 2003; Nasir et al. 2006). In our analysis we utilize this distinction between routine and adaptive expertise to describe variations in how youth participated in encounters with policymakers. In a political context, an activist with adaptive expertise would do more than recite a script, but instead know how to read the mood of her audience, respond to questions, and make a compelling argument in the moment.

Our analysis of access points is guided by two objectives. First, we draw on CHAT to describe access points as learning environments for youth participants. Second, we present evidence of specific learning opportunities observed across access points, in which youth practiced a form of persuasive speech rooted in social science discourse practices and drew on academic

tools to reach their goals. We analyze youths' appropriation of social science terminology in terms of observed variation between routine and adaptive expertise.

Methodology

The claims presented in this article are derived from a re-examination of data collected in four separate studies about youth civic engagement and activism – three of these were completed by the first author and one was completed by the second author (Geil 2005; Kirshner 2008; Nasir and Kirshner 2003). These prior studies did not analyze access points as learning environments. We reanalyzed our data collaboratively 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 common characteristics of access points when viewed as learning environments? What learning opportunities emerged in these interactions?

Data Sources

Interactions between youth and adults. Our analysis is based on observations of themes that were common across fourteen “access points,” defined as organized encounters in which youth present political grievances or policy proposals to adult civic leaders and policymakers. These access points represented the culmination of projects or campaigns organized by youth to accomplish various public goals. Table 1 lists the types of access points included in our analysis. The number of community leaders at these access points varied. The smallest was a meeting with four newspaper editors and reporters; the largest was a hearing before a regional transportation board with several hundred community members in attendance. We documented these encounters with narrative field notes (for eleven observations) and video (for three observations). In order to understand these events, we also made use of written artifacts, such as policy platforms written by youth and newspaper articles about the events. These artifacts helped us understand

the ideas youth hoped to advance and the wider sociopolitical context of the access points.

Table 1. *Observations of 14 access points*

Meeting type	Youth group objectives	Did youth achieve goals?
School Board meeting	1. Promote student leadership opportunities	1. Partially – Endorsement but no authority because of state takeover
	2. Create equity in school financing	2. No – Youths’ integrity doubted
	3. Create safe atmosphere for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth	3. Yes – Proposed changes were adopted
	4. Keep school from being closed	4. Partially – School was closed but one demand met (transportation to new schools)
	5. Keep school from being closed	5. Partially – School was closed but one demand met (transportation to new schools)
Meeting with community leaders	6. Reduce negative stereotypes about youth of color in TV and print news	6. Community leaders did not have decision-making power
	7. Promote safety in local high school	7. Community leaders did not have decision-making power
	8. Understand impact of school closure	8. Community leaders did not have decision-making power
City Council meeting	9. Create equity in funding for parks and recreation across city	9. No data available regarding result
	10. Create equity in funding for parks and recreation across city	10.No data available regarding result

Table 2 (continued). *Observations of 14 access points*

Meeting type	Youth group objectives	Did youth achieve goals?
Meeting with news editors	11.Reduce negative stereotypes about youth of color in TV and print news	11. No – Newspaper maintained its policy
Transportation Board hearing	12. Continue subsidizing bus passes for low-income youth	12.Yes – Bus pass policy continued
Panel of local and federal legislators	13.Limit military recruitment in public schools and end support for Iraq War	13. Partially – Policymakers pledged to not support military recruitment
Meeting with district administrators	14. Understand impact of school closure on students and create policies to mitigate effects of future closures	14.Partially – Administrators pledged to incorporate findings into future planning

Ethnographic data. In addition to observing the access points, we conducted more than 350 hours of ethnographic observation and 52 interviews with youth participants in six of the groups as part of separate research about youth activism groups. For the purposes of this article, we re-examined these observations and interviews to help us understand how encounters with policymakers related to the broader context of youth activism campaigns, how youth interpreted the encounters, and how the encounters offered learning opportunities to youth.

Table 2 provides background information about the eight youth groups that participated in our research (some groups were observed participating in more than one access point). Five groups were based in non-profit organizations, two were school-based student leadership groups, and one was a social studies class. Groups hailed from four different cities in the Western United States. Groups were included in this study because they were engaged in civic activism projects sustained over more than three months and they culminated their work with meetings with adult civic leaders. Aside from the Youth Mapping group, whose participants were in middle school,

and Tracing Transitions, which included two college students, participants were in high school. The racial and ethnic composition of the groups varied; all but one was comprised of mostly youth from racial and ethnic minority groups. Six of the groups offered financial stipends to participants. Because participants self-selected into seven of the eight groups, we do not argue that they were representative of all urban youth in the United States.

Author Roles

In five of the eight groups we analyze, the authors' roles were limited to observers and researchers. In two groups (YELL and Youth Mapping), Kirshner provided input into program design but was not the project leader. In one group (Tracing Transitions), Kirshner was one of two adults who helped lead the project. This blurring of lines between researcher and participant, although unconventional in some research traditions, is not uncommon in community-based research (e.g., Cammarota & Fine 2008). Kirshner managed bias by sharing data and interpretations with Geil in the process of analysis and writing. Although it can raise challenges for data analysis, we believe that important insights about social processes in these groups are gained when the researcher plays a dual role of participant and observer.

Table 3. *Information about youth groups*

Groups	Mission/Goals	Organizational Context	# of Youth Participants	# of Adult Advisors	Racial/ Ethnic Backgrounds of Youth
GLBT Task Force	Improve climate for GLBT students, faculty, and staff	School task force	3	2	European American
Social Studies Class	Learn social studies through authentic projects	High school	15	1	Latino
Students United	Organize youth of color to fight for educational justice	Grassroots nonprofit advocacy organization	8-10 ^{a b}	2	African American; Latino
Tracing Transitions	Action research to study impact of school closure	Student club supported by school district	9	4	African American; Latino
TRUE	Teach young people about environmental justice and urban sustainability	Environmental justice nonprofit organization	6 ^a	4	African American; Asian American; European American; Latino
YELL	Promote youth voice by training students in research and leadership	Program of research center focused on youth development	12-18 ^b	3	African American; Asian American; Latino
Youth Mapping	Promote youth voice by training students in research and leadership	Program of research center focused on youth development	12	3	European American; Latino
Youth Rising	Organize students to lead a youth social justice movement	Grassroots nonprofit advocacy organization	8-12 ^{a b}	3	African American; Asian American

^a Youth Rising, Students United, and TRUE were based on an “organizing” model, which means that there were two tiers of participation: core youth organizers and members. This table lists the number of core organizers but not the overall membership.

^b Number of participants varied over the course of fieldwork.

Data Analysis

Access points as learning environments. Because of the lack of prior research analyzing social processes when youth interact with community leaders and political decision-makers, we began data analysis in an inductive, exploratory manner. Our first step was to inductively audit our data for a comprehensive list of rituals and routines observed in access points (Fetterman 1998).

Thumbnail summaries of each access point aided our review. For example, in eleven of the fourteen access points youth participants marshaled evidence from empirical research they had conducted. Also, much like a theatre performance or athletic contest, adults often faded to the sidelines when it was time for the interactions to begin. After we had developed this list, we examined the extent to which these descriptors held true across observations while also looking for inconsistencies and variation (LeCompte & Schensul 1999).

Once we had generated a robust list of patterns across sites, we employed categories from cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) to make sense of them theoretically, including goals, division of labor, and cultural artifacts that mediated youths' participation. Of these categories, our focus on goals may appear circular because we specifically selected groups based on their social change goals. Nevertheless, we felt it was important to analyze how goals were articulated by youth participants in the context of their meetings with community leaders. We employed CHAT as a theoretical framework because it provides a commonly-used framework for studying learning environments and it is consistent with our view that learning is mediated by culture and social context.

Opportunities to learn in access points. After identifying setting-level features of access points, we identified skills that youth had the opportunity to learn through participation, such as how to use evidence, also called *warrants*, to support their claims or how to respond to questions. We observed variation in types of participation. Some youth relied on pre-written scripts or the

assistance of more experienced adult advisors. Other youth participated without scripts and responded to unanticipated questions. Concepts of routine versus adaptive expertise provided a lens to make sense of this variation.

Findings

Access Points as Learning Environments

We draw on cultural historical activity theory to describe access points along four dimensions: goals, participant structures, the division of labor, and mediating artifacts.

Goals

Consistent with the literature on youth activism, group members came together around social change goals. Within that broad frame, however, we observed that seven of the eight groups sought to address a *local* problem affecting young people. For example, youth sought to increase financing for their school district, increase leadership opportunities for students, improve the images of youth of color in local news outlets, create a safer climate for GLBT students, prevent further school closures in their neighborhood, make their schools safer, create more recreational opportunities for children in low-income neighborhoods, change school reform policies, provide free bus passes for low-income youth, and reduce military recruitment in public schools. In one case youths' goal was to stop the war in Iraq, which was the only example where youth targeted an issue outside of their city.

In interviews, when we asked youth participants to discuss what their groups were about, they defined the group missions primarily in terms of giving voice to youth and influencing social change. For example, one participant said, "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" (Youth Rising participant). A participant from a different group focused on social change, saying, "...That's what action research is about,

change...Not just making a report and writing a book about it. It's actually going out there and making a change" (Tracing Transitions participant). Across a range of interviews, youth participants raised themes such as fairness, voice, and change. They invoke action verbs to describe their goals: "speak for people," "help...people," "making a change," "do something," "making the school a better place."

Although youths' goals were public-minded, in most cases they were not strictly altruistic. Instead they reflected a combination of self and collective interests typical of public work (Boyte 2004). For example, the youth activists were directly affected by many of the issues they worked on. Consider the example of subsidies for bus passes for youth. In their public speeches, youth activists told personal stories about why they benefited from reduced bus rates to get to school. At the same time, their successful effort to persuade the regional transportation board to provide bus passes for students on free and reduced lunch had consequences for numerous students in the area.

Opportunities to meet with community leaders were rare; they often represented the culmination of campaigns that ranged from three months to several years. When they did occur, youth saw them as opportunities to influence public issues that mattered to them. It was important to youth that they were "listened to," as indicated by Denise's quotation at the beginning of the paper. Another young person from the Youth Mapping project concluded her presentation to the city council by saying,

I just want to say that 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.

We interpret students' appreciation of the chance to be heard as a sign of relatively modest expectations for their participation in access points. In other words, in several cases youth felt they had been successful if they had

presented their ideas, regardless of what the eventual impact of those presentations were.

Participant Structures

We define participant structures as patterned “ways of arranging verbal interactions” (Philips 1972, 377) between youth and adults in a learning environment. In access points, this typically meant that participation was organized by a pre-set agenda, with explicit rules regarding who could speak, when they could speak, and for how long. In presentations to school boards or city councils, for example, youth groups signed up several days in advance and were given a time slot, just as would be expected of adult community members who wished to speak. But even in meetings with newspaper editors or district administrators, where there were not pre-established, explicit rules for participation, interactions tended to follow a similar pattern: youth made a presentation, adult policymakers responded through questions or comments, youth sometimes had the opportunity to respond to their responses, and the meeting ended.

Because of this formality, youths’ actual participation had the quality of a theatrical performance or speech. It was common for speakers to express nervousness prior to the meetings. Similar to a formal performance, youth rehearsed prior to their encounters with adults. Often adult mentors coached them on their public speaking. In most cases this preparation focused on the execution of the speech – making eye contact, speaking clearly, and having a coherent message. We observed only one case where the preparation involved not just execution of the speech, but also practice responding to unscripted questions from the audience. In this group adults organized role-playing games during which the adults played the part of hostile or skeptical policymakers trying to undermine the youth speakers by asking them random questions or purposefully misinterpreting their statements. Our observations suggested that youth from this group were more skillful in later

interactions when it came to responding to unexpected questions or speaking off-script.

Mediating Tools and Artifacts

Mediating artifacts refer to culturally-specific tools or symbols (Wertsch 1998), which youth appropriated in their presentations. Some of these were readily identifiable as tools. For example, youth typically wrote down their thoughts on index cards or pre-written scripts and relied on these when speaking. Also, some groups used PowerPoint technology or overhead projectors as visual aids.

We also observed youth appropriate culturally-specific discourse practices, specifically a form of persuasive speech associated with social science discourse. By social science discourse we mean the appeal to empirical warrants, based in systematic research, for a particular argument or claim. Six out of the eight groups conducted surveys of peers, community members, or teachers and used the results of their surveys to strengthen their messages to adult policymakers. We observed this use of empirical warrants in 11 of the 14 access points. 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.

Youths’ appeal to empirical warrants was part of a strategic effort to gain legitimacy in the eyes of policymakers. By sharing data obtained from a broad sample, for example, the speakers could demonstrate that they represented a larger group. The appeal to empirical warrants also had the potential of shifting the tenor of the conversation to one based on systematic evidence. In one encounter an adult audience member commented on this

specific point. After hearing students report the impact of a school closure, she responded by saying she was “impressed that the students were open to the data,” even though they came to it “with passions and biases.” The students had demonstrated to her that although they were motivated by deeply-felt personal convictions, they had also sought to be true to what a larger sample of their peers had experienced. In most cases youths’ appropriation of social science discourse appeared to impress policymakers and hold symbolic power.

In one case, however, youths’ appropriation of academic forms of discourse led to suspicion by adult policymakers, primarily because of the adults’ flawed assumptions about what the youth presenters were capable of. At a school board meeting in a large, urban, public school district, a high school class comprised of Latino students, some of whom were English language learners, presented results of surveys they had administered to teachers in their school. The students had written a script for their presentation as part of their class work; at the meeting they took turns reading parts of it. They communicated key statistics about teachers’ views of the lack of resources in their school. After the presentation, two White board members questioned whether the presentation had actually been authored by students. 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?” Later the students’ teacher, who was White, responded to these questions by saying:

I find it very insulting that you insult the intelligence of my students by saying they do not have the intelligence to write their own speeches. You did not ask the White students from _____ the same question. My students, because they are Latino, deserve to have respect. And I find it an insult that you question their integrity and their intelligence, and I think that it was a racist comment.

In this example, the students appropriated a social science discourse to make their point. But rather than give them additional leverage, this strategy made them suspect in the eyes of two board members because of mistaken assumptions about the students' abilities, which the teacher attributed to racist assumptions. (We did not collect additional data from youth or board members to check this interpretation). This was the only situation we observed, however, in which youth's appropriation of social science discourse was greeted with skepticism.

Division of Labor within Activism Groups

We observed variation in the ways that youth and adults worked together across the groups as they worked on their projects or campaigns. Projects ranged in the extent to which they were youth or adult-led, the types of participation available to adults, and how decisions were made (see also Kirshner 2008).

Here we focus on two patterns in the division of labor during the access points themselves, rather than the times when youth were preparing for them. First, with one exception, adult leaders of youth groups faded to the sidelines during meetings with adult policymakers. Youth were positioned as the public representatives of the groups. Adults were present but did not have speaking roles beyond making introductions.

Second, in all of the access points, youth presented themselves as a collective, rather than as individuals. Youth coordinated their actions with each other – they established in advance what each person was saying so that their overall message was coherent. For example, in seven of the interactions, groups prepared one presentation, using visual aids, to which each individual contributed a distinct part. In these cases each speaker typically wrote her or his own part but had to be aware of how it contributed to the whole. In cases without visual aids there was still a coherence and lack of repetition to what youth said. For example, at a school board hearing

members of Youth Rising each cited different results from their survey to provide cumulative evidence for their claims. The least orchestrated case took place at a community forum hastily arranged for students and community members to respond to a school closure. At this meeting students did not have a shared presentation because they came from three separate small schools. But even there participants found a way to signal their collective membership by wearing T-shirts (“Not Down with the Shut Down”) and stickers that signaled their allegiance to a shared goal. The notion of collective, rather than individual, action, was reinforced in the words to a chant that members of one group created and distributed at a rally to build support for their student power resolution. Whereas the original lyrics of the song by a well-known rap artist (“I Know I Can,” Nas 2002), focused on personal self-reliance and uplift, youth organizers revised the lyrics to express a collective message (“We know we can...when we organize together”).

Learning Opportunities in Access Points

Access points constituted an authentic setting for youth to learn how to construct and sustain a persuasive policy argument, which we call persuasive speech. Doing so involved learning public speaking skills, on one hand, but also how to appropriate academic discourse practices, such as using warrants to support claims. These skills are important because they enable participation in a robust, deliberative public sphere (Boyte 2004).

We observed variation in youths’ abilities to engage in persuasive speech. The distinction between routine and adaptive expertise helps illustrate this range. While routine expertise reflects the ability to carry out a scripted task, adaptive expertise reflects the ability to improvise in response to new questions or when certain tools are not available (Bransford et al. 1999). We recognize that these youth speakers were not true experts – they were young and new to the arena of political decision-making. But the distinction between routine and adaptive is useful for understanding the kinds of skills

that young people need to be effective in interactions with adult decision-makers.

Routine Forms of Persuasive Speech

In most cases we observed students demonstrate “routine expertise” in their interactions with policymakers, such as by relying on written scripts to make their presentations. Youths’ speech performances in these contexts reflected practice and skill – it is no easy feat to speak in front of an audience where the stakes are high. But sometimes adults asked critical questions or defended themselves in ways that youth did not expect. In these cases, youths’ routine skills were not adequate to the task of engaging in deliberation or improvised dialogue with community leaders and policymakers.

An example of routine expertise can be seen in a presentation by YELL, which 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. In the episode analyzed here, five student members and two adult staff members met with a four-person team of editors, journalists, and interns from a local newspaper to discuss the problem of media representations. Youth participants hoped to persuade the newspaper to write more “positive” stories about their neighborhood and not always focus on the “negative.”

We observed routine expertise when a youth presenter struggled to respond to a follow-up question from a newspaper editor. The presenter, Arun, 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.” A journalist asked Arun a specific question about his data: “Did you ask the people if they watch the news, read the newspaper?” Arun initially responded by saying “Yes,” and began looking through his surveys to show the

journalist. He eventually fell silent. One of the adult advisors for the project interjected, saying, "I don't think we asked about that." Whether or not Arun simply forgot that he hadn't asked that question on his survey, or was trying to give the "right" answer even though he knew it to be incorrect, he clearly struggled to adapt to the demands of the situation. Once the encounter departed from his prepared script, he did not participate further.

Adaptive Forms of Persuasive Speech

We observed some students who, when presented with opportunities to draw on adaptive rather than routine expertise, treated the access point as an open-ended interaction. These youth spoke extemporaneously and responded creatively to adult arguments. They departed from scripts and responded flexibly to the situation, which forced adults to respond directly to what they were saying.

YELL's meeting with newspaper editors also showcased a student who demonstrated adaptive expertise. During the presentation students criticized the newspaper's practice of putting stories about homicides on the front page. They felt that doing so portrayed youth as "murderers and killers" and neglected positive stories about youths' lives. The editor gave a lengthy defense of this practice, arguing that it was more respectful to homicide victims to write about their plight than to consign it to the back pages, and that television news, not print news, was the worst culprit of sensationalism.

The editor's defense of putting murder stories on the front page was a new argument that the group had not discussed. Rather than falling silent, as Arun had done in the example above, a high school sophomore named Marlene responded without missing a beat and spoke 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 by selling papers. 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 the newspaper editor had said, she introduced new points in response, and she framed the issue in terms of a moral issue that adults and youth could agree on: "It shouldn't be that way." Marlene's performance reflected a trajectory towards adaptive expertise – she responded flexibly to the circumstances by dealing with an argument that had not been anticipated when the group was preparing for the meeting. This represented a step beyond routine expertise in terms of her ability to make a persuasive argument about an important civic issue.

A second example further illustrates the value of adaptive expertise in civic encounters. Members of a youth participatory action research project presented their research findings about the effects of a school closure to a group of adult community leaders who they expected to be a sympathetic audience. After the presentation, however, some members of the audience focused exclusively on a bar graph that showed that a majority of students felt successful in their new schools after the closure. They charged that the research findings could be used by proponents of the closure to show that it

was the right decision, and questioned whether or not the students' presentation was merely serving to appease the district.

Some of the youth action researchers appeared caught off guard by this response, but two spoke up. Lucy, a high school senior, objected to the interpretation that feeling successful meant that students benefited from the closure. She said that one could feel "successful" and still be angry about the closure of the school. To her, students' reports of feeling successful were evidence that the students were trying to make the best of a tough situation. Her response was followed by Bianca, a junior in college, who argued that the student group and their presentation were politically aligned with the community activists. She did this by pointing out that the presentation recommended against further school closures, and that group members had been outspoken about the closure and would "be there by your [the audience's] side" in any upcoming protests. Similar to Lucy, she differentiated the research results from her personal biases. She said that she had expected the research to prove how bad it was for students after the closure but it had turned out to be more complex. In so doing she upheld the integrity of the research while also asserting that she was aware of its political significance.

Lucy and Bianca's comments demonstrated their ability to go off-script and respond to an unanticipated comment from the audience. They offered new interpretations of the data and asserted their integrity as action researchers. Similar to Marlene, they were able to adapt to the new demands of the situation and engage in deliberation and debate with their interlocutors. These examples were chosen to illustrate our point but were not the sole cases we observed.

Discussion

In this paper we analyzed access points as learning environments for youth. Youths' purpose in these encounters was to achieve a public good. Their

presentations were part of highly formalized participant structures; youth rehearsed their scripts and performed for the audience. Youth appropriated social scientific forms of discourse when making their policy arguments. In doing so, they acted as a collective, typically taking center stage while adults faded to the sidelines. In most cases youths' presentations reflected routine expertise – they relied on pre-written scripts, note-cards, and coaching from adults. In rare cases youth demonstrated adaptive expertise, in which presenters responded to challenging comments and made new arguments. In our view both kinds of expertise represent important learning opportunities because they enable youth to participate in the democratic sphere.

Caveats

Because the patterns we observed are drawn from a small, non-representative sample, further research is needed that tests their robustness across different age groups, types of youth organizations, and decision-making settings. A second caveat is that we must distinguish between opportunities to learn and evidence of learning. We provided examples of opportunities, but our data did not permit us to analyze change over time in individual youth's participation. We also recognize that variations between routine and adaptive expertise in persuasive speech may not just be about skill level, but also about variations in cultural norms about how to interact with elders (e.g., Bailey & Pransky 2005; Rogoff 2003).

Despite these limitations, our analysis represents an initial effort to characterize social processes in settings where youth activists and community leaders actually interact. We call attention to two implications for educators and adult allies who wish to support youths' effective participation in decision-making settings.

Strategic Use of Social Science Discourse

We found that youth activists appropriated academic discourses as tools for advancing social and political goals that affected their everyday lives. This

phenomenon can be thought of as *strategic adaptation*, because it involved adaptation to the norms of policy settings, but in a strategic, provisional manner. The youth leaders and activists we observed sought to participate in these settings in ways that would allow them to accomplish their social change goals. But we did not see evidence that these adaptations were tied to a broader assimilationist agenda. For example, consistent with other research findings about youth activism (Ginwright & James 2002), several groups made use of local youth cultural practices, such as hip hop music and graffiti, to build support for their campaigns among participants and their peers. Urrieta's (2005) distinction between "playing the game" and "selling out," based on interviews and focus groups with Chicano/a self-identified activists, is relevant here. Playing the game, according to Urrieta, involved adapting to norms and practices of White institutions, while at the same time not forgetting that this adaptation was provisional. For several participants in Urrieta's study, playing the game was a strategic, and necessary, way to accomplish larger, social justice goals.

This notion of strategic adaptation contributes one alternative 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 celebrate the complex forms of narrative among minority youth may be well-intentioned, but they risk depriving these same youth of opportunities to learn practical skills required in mainstream institutions. At the same time, however, educational researchers working with culturally diverse populations have shown that strict adherence to narrow, Eurocentric forms of academic knowledge ignores or excludes children's culturally-rooted repertoires of practice that promote their learning and development (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejada; Lee 2007).

The access points we observed, and the forms of strategic adaptation used within them, suggest that these encounters provide an opportunity in which

mainstream academic practices were used as tools to accomplish social justice goals. Complicated academic skills such as survey design or descriptive statistics were 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 related to social change and public work (see also Rogers et al. 2007; Tate 1995). And through their participation, youth gained experience with skills that could also be useful to them in academic settings. The political purpose of youth activism campaigns provided a superordinate goal that contextualized and organized all related activities.

Critics of this notion of strategic adaptation might argue that it does not go far enough in challenging the hegemony of academic English as the “naturalized,” privileged form of speech in public decision-making settings. It is true that few participants attempted to transform the normative discourse practices of these public spaces. Moreover, we are not arguing that the only way to be effective in access points is to “play the game” by appropriating academic discourses. As youth activism groups evolve and adapt their strategies, future research that describes how young people transform access points, rather than just fit into them, will be important.

Promoting Adaptive Expertise

A second implication points to learning opportunities that promote adaptive expertise. As others have written, learning outside of school is particularly suited to adaptive expertise because it is usually ill-defined and unpredictable (Hatano & Oura 2003). There is not a textbook or worksheet to follow when figuring out how to change media images of youth or limit military recruitment in schools. Nor can one anticipate in advance how interactions will go with journalists or policymakers. In our view, such opportunities enable youth to develop the kinds of creative, resourceful, improvisational thinking that is rewarded in an increasingly information-based economy (Sawyer 2006).

But developing this form of adaptive expertise is challenging. For this reason we offer four tips for preparing youth activists to be persuasive in their encounters with community leaders, including how to respond to unexpected questions. One effective strategy is to “role-play” scenarios where youth practice their responses to hostile or skeptical questions or comments. In our research, youth were often confronted with such situations, and yet only one group prepared for them in advance. This preparation helped the presenters to stay composed and on message when departing from prepared scripts. Second, one group we observed trained its youth organizers to “caucus” with each other if a meeting was going in a direction they did not expect. Caucusing enables youth to pause the meeting, leave the room, confer with one another, and then return with a shared responses. A third recommendation is to train youth in how to stay *low-inference* in their interactions with adults. Staying low-inference refers to a habit of mind in which one does not make unwarranted assumptions about another person’s motives or beliefs, but instead seeks to clarify ambiguous statements or behavior. Such efforts can often prevent misunderstandings from escalating into argument or mistrust. Lastly, we have observed in some cases that youth have limited expectations for their interactions with adults, such that if the adults are polite then the meeting feels like a success. We advise groups to expect more from access points, including demanding that adult policymakers spell out how and when will follow through on the particular issues raised, consistent with effective community activism. Pushing policymakers in this way will often lead to deeper discussions that involve improvisation and deliberation.

Of course, we recognize that youths’ effectiveness in encounters with policymakers is not just about the quality of their arguments or their ability to demonstrate adaptive expertise. Issues of power no doubt come into play. Elected officials may feel little pressure to respond to the demands of people who are not eligible to vote. Youth activists are often doubly-marginalized by

their race or class, as may have been the case for the Latino students whose presentation about school conditions was challenged by school board members. This is why building power in numbers through community organizing is also necessary. In such circumstances, when young people gain a seat at the table, those youth who can read the situation, speak persuasively, and respond to unexpected contingencies will be prepared to maximize their opportunity.

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Footnotes

¹ Pseudonyms are used to refer to all people and groups in this article.