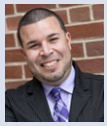
Rethinking Gaps

Literacies and Languages in Participatory Cultures

KORINA JOCSON & JONATHAN ROSA

Youth in participatory cultures have demonstrated the many different ways that media technologies can shape social connections and learning in educational settings. As put forth by the MacArthur Foundation's Digital Media and Learning Initiative, participatory culture is "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). Forms of participatory culture include affiliations or group memberships, expressions through production, collaborative problem-solving, and circulations of information. With continued efforts in the study of digital literacies, particularly among children and youth, there remains a concern for shaping policy and pedagogical interventions. Jenkins and colleagues have noted that attention must be given to the participation gap, transparency problem, and ethics challenge. Accordingly, the *participation gap* refers to the "unequal access to opportunities, experiences, skills, and knowledge that will prepare youth for full participation in the world of tomorrow"; the *transparency problem* refers to the "challenges young people face in learning to see clearly the ways that media shape perceptions of the world"; and the *ethics challenge* refers to the "breakdown of traditional forms of professional training and socialization that might prepare young people for their increasingly public roles as media makers and community participants" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3).

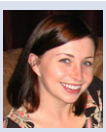



Authors (left to right)

Korina Jocson is an assistant professor in the College of Education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, USA; e-mail kjocson@umass.edu.

Jonathan Rosa is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, USA; e-mail jdrosa@umass.edu.

In this column on popular culture and digital literacies, we take up these concerns in participatory cultures to revisit a longstanding issue pertaining to language. Evident in the literature on digital literacies is an implicit treatment of language; that is, some assumptions are made regarding whose language or languages we are talking about or being inclusive of when discussing participatory cultures. Drawing on the aforementioned definition of participatory culture, it is then important to ask: What linguistic forms do artistic expression and civic engagement take? How are linguistic differences supported or discouraged (implicitly or explicitly) through particular approaches to participation and mentorship? With more advanced media technologies, how might different participatory cultures locally and globally be further conceived with linguistic differences in mind? Similar to the project of the New London Group (1996), we see the value of multiliteracies with attention to multiple languages and varieties in the new media landscape as key toward youth's fuller participation in a democratic society. In our respective research, we are challenged by questions that seek to identify literacies and languages as repertoires of practice in youth's lives (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). We want to know, if youth are communicating and engaging with each other across media platforms, what languages or linguistic forms are leveraged in their lives? In what ways are youth supported socially and educationally? Such questions and others have been central to our work with low-income youth of color in



The department editor welcomes reader comments. Jen Scott Curwood is a senior lecturer in English education and media studies at the University of Sydney in Australia; e-mail js.curwood@sydney.edu.au.

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urban schools and communities. Thus, our purpose in coming together for this column is to make language more explicit in the conversation.

Rethinking the Participation Gap and "Language Gap"

An important concern in discussions of "participatory culture" is the potential for this notion to reproduce commonsense conceptions in which culture is viewed as a static set of practices rather than a contested, dynamic process whereby norms are (re)produced and (trans)formed. From a static perspective on culture, overcoming the participation gap within a continuous digital divide involves socializing as many people as possible to normative cultural practices, namely standardized language and literacy. This thinking presumes that opening access to these practices corresponds to increased levels of societal inclusion. However, such views do not take into account the ways that the forms of value associated with modes of participation are susceptible to change, such that simply engaging in standardized language and literacy practices by no means ensures societal inclusion or the eradication of the participation gap. Thus, our conceptualization of participatory culture, and particularly in relation to the participation gap, requires a theorization of difference that moves beyond simply seeking to assimilate or embrace it. How are participatory cultural differences constituted, from whose perspectives are they recognized as such, and what are the institutional and broader societal implications of these differences? Is the participation gap merely a matter of difference in opportunities, experience, skills, and knowledge, or is it indicative of broader processes of exclusion?

Linguistic practices often figure centrally in these considerations of the participation gap, which is reflected in ongoing discourses surrounding the so-called "language gap." In the logic of language gap discourses, it is argued that low-income minoritized youth who are socialized to non-normative linguistic practices in their homes and communities suffer from limited linguistic abilities that impede educational achievement due to unfamiliarity with school-based linguistic norms. "Funds of knowledge" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and other asset-based approaches have critiqued these deficit linguistic perspectives by emphasizing the educational value of linguistic and cultural difference. Here, we are concerned with the ways that these insights have been reduced to a deficit versus difference binary. In this binary model, linguistic diversity can either be viewed as a problem to overcome or as a valuable educational resource. However, the purported embrace of difference is often co-opted through models of appropriateness (a type of cultural capital) that reify school norms and a gap-gazing fetish (Gutiérrez & Dixon-Román, 2011). In contrast, we suggest that, in order to challenge gap-gazing and gap-based thinking, it is crucial to develop an understanding of communicative repertoires (Rymes, 2011), on the one hand, and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2014), on the other. By combining communicative repertoires and culturally sustaining pedagogies, it becomes possible to analyze the range of linguistic practices and untapped abilities in which young people engage in their lives and critically reflect on the ways that these practices reinforce and challenge hegemonic school norms. Our emphasis on contestation is intended to underscore the limitations of simply embracing difference rather than interrogating the Othering processes through which notions of difference are produced. In our view, the latter is key to deepening our sensibilities as researchers and educators.

Examples from our own research demonstrate the need for a critical reflection on participation and language "gaps" from the perspective of communicative repertoires and culturally sustaining pedagogies. In Jocson's work with high school students in the urban Midwest, literacy practices range from reading and writing texts (inclusive of social texts), to talking about them, to interpreting them and using the language of new media to produce multimedia projects (Jocson, forthcoming). In one instance, students in a multimedia communications class were tasked through an inquiry process to create an op-ed video about a social or educational issue that can be shared with different audiences. One particular bilingual Latino student chose to record and broadcast his multimedia project on the internationalization of gang affiliation entirely in Spanish with no English subtitles. As noted in an interview, "Spanish felt right" to reach a targeted audience. The choice was purposeful as it was pedagogical and reflected the embrace of a particular communicative logic. A culturally sustaining pedagogies perspective allows us to understand the cultural significance of the decision despite its potential illegibility/unintelligibility for certain audiences. The resultant op-ed video turned call to action built on communicative repertoires that enabled

this student to enact a specific type of participation in the new media landscape. The op-ed video was not only broadcast at the school, but also appeared on the school district's television station website and screened at a local community event where further dialogue about the op-ed topic took place. In Rosa's work with Latina/o youth, also in the urban Midwest, literacy practices not only defied the "in school"/"out of school" binary, but also presented alternative communicative logics that are deserving of critical reflection (Rosa, 2014). For example, one group of students circulated an anonymously authored journal—a composition notebook they titled "Gossip n' Drama: The Issues!"—in which they collectively wrote and read about events taking place in one another's everyday lives. Drawing on the popular cultural literacy genre of the "burn book," students created journal entries outside of school yet adhered to what many educators might recognize as school-based literacy conventions. Thus, "in school" literacies are often learned and practiced outside of school and vice versa. However, in contrast to this apparent continuity between in school and out of school literacies, the logic of collective authorship, anonymity, and the disparaging content characteristic of these literacy practices pose problems for any straightforward, school-based embrace of these differences. A culturally sustaining pedagogies approach to such practices would lead to a critical analysis of, or at least careful attention to the question of, what would be sustained by the incorporation of these practices into mainstream curricula. These examples illustrate the importance of rethinking the ways that differences are ascribed to particular aspects of communicative repertoires, as well as the difficulty involved in simply embracing these differences.

In Moving Forward

It is important to develop more critical understandings of language and difference than those on which current conceptualizations of participatory cultures are built. To further think through the participation gap, along with the transparency problem and ethics challenge, is to address the notions surrounding language gaps in efforts to support youth's engagement, learning, and social connections across affinity spaces. Minimally, educators must recognize that language is at the core of cultural competencies and social skills in the new media landscape. It is also important to explore what happens when youth engage each other across physical and virtual borders (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014; Lam, 2009; Williams & Zenger, 2012). Taking part in participatory cultures requires thinking or processing thought in language, communicating through language, as well as drawing on various communicative repertoires. We believe that such an approach to participatory cultures treats language as key and can be helpful in designing social futures of the next generation.

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