The art of youthful restraint: negotiating youth-adult relations in digital media literacy

Carlos Jimenez , Lynn Schofield Clark , Heather Kennedy , Stephanie Nisle , Corey Engle , Savahanna Matyasic & Yolanda Anyon

Published online: 17 Feb 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ⎘

View related articles ⎘

View Crossmark data ⎘

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

The art of youthful restraint: negotiating youth-adult relations in digital media literacy

Carlos Jimenez[a], Lynn Schofield Clark[a], Heather Kennedy[b], Stephanie Nisle[b], Corey Engle[b], Savahanna Matyasic[b] and Yolanda Anyon[b]

[a]Media, Film and Journalism Studies, University of Denver, Denver, CO, USA; [b]Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver, Denver, CO, USA

ABSTRACT

Scholarship on youth digital media literacy programs has focused on how adults practice restraint as a means of allowing young people to exercise agency in decision-making experiences. Yet youth also practice restraint, as we found in a digital storytelling program involving 16 early adolescents (ages 11–14) from economically precarious communities who worked with 18 adult mentors trained in discussing systemic and racial injustices in the context of trauma-informed practices. Building on a framework of critical youth studies, our ethnographic data reveals how youth deployed their own version of restraint that is simultaneously *defensive* and *agentive*. We argue that this is a form of empowerment that needs to be better understood in the contexts of actual practices of youth/adult media co-production, and in relation to support for the development of critical, participatory and collaborative, and expressive competencies (Mihailidis, P., and B. Thevenin. 2013. "Media Literacy as a Core Competency for Engaged Citizenship in Participatory Democracy." *American Behavioral Scientist* 57 (11): 1611–1622). Restraint is thus presented as a strategy of empowerment that youth develop in relation to digital media literacy and youth voice, especially for young people from populations historically marginalized and frequently misunderstood in media and in public life.

Introduction

Previous research has established that youth media production programs have a range of perceived benefits that include social, emotional, political, and educational growth, as Goodman (2003) observed and as others have affirmed (Anderson and Mack 2017; Buckingham 2008; Chávez and Soep 2005).

Although such programs sometimes are rooted in a traditional life stage paradigm that views young people as 'developmentally incomplete' and in need of guidance and discipline (Cerecer, Cahill, and Bradley 2013, 217), most programs informed by critical media literacy operate instead from a critical youth studies perspective that foregrounds the strengths young people bring to the present moment (see, e.g., Bailey et al. 2019). Young people are understood not as future adults in need of socialization, but rather as active participants working to be both literate and engaged as citizens in today's multicultural digital media landscape.

When young people produce stories together with guidance from adults, they can reorganize their shared social world, as Chavez and Soep (2010) have poignantly argued. Such processes are

---

therefore linked with ideas of youth empowerment and agency. But as this article describes, we found that the stories that young people choose to co-produce trigger differing responses among adult mentors, which in turn shape the way young people experience agency and empowerment. Young people then decide how they will move forward with their stories, including how they feel about them and whether or not they choose to share them. By understanding more about these processes, we argue that adults and young people will be better prepared to reflect on how authority is negotiated in various intergenerational settings.

In this article, we look at the question of empowerment and we ask: how do youth exercise empowerment in youth/adult settings of youth media co-production? And further, how does the strategy of empowerment relate to the core competencies of critical media literacy that prepare young people to act as engaged citizens?

Following Blum-Ross (2015), we understand empowerment as comprised of both critical media literacy (Goodman 2003) and youth voice (Soep 2006). Young people become empowered through youth media programs when, through an analysis of their own consumptive practices, they come to understand relationships between media conventions, representation, meaning, and power, and develop the capacity to share their own stories. But participating in media production does not inevitably result in empowerment, as Blum-Ross points out (see also Buckingham 2003).

Whereas Blum-Ross considered the limitations of empowerment in the context of participatory youth media production, we consider empowerment in the context of a program utilizing digital storytelling methods that was grounded within a larger program of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). With a team of university researchers and research assistants, we designed the summer project and were supported by a youth leadership facilitator and a group of mentors. We were particularly concerned with the micro-relations between young people and their adult mentors as they negotiated issues related to media conventions, representation, meaning, and power. Thus, we considered how, within these relationships, young people developed what Mihailidis and Thevenin (2013) have referred to as the critical, participatory and collaborative, and expressive competencies that prepare young people to act as engaged citizens through the exercise of youth voice.

Scholars of critical youth studies have focused on how young people are involved in shaping their own learning environments, sometimes in alliance with adults and at other times needing to navigate conflicts with adults (Cammarota and Fine 2010; Delgado and Staples 2008; Ginwright and James 2002). Digital storytelling programs can offer enhanced pedagogical spaces for resistance and resilience, allowing youth to experience and experiment with self-expression, identity, media literacy, and civic engagement (Akom, Cammarota, and Ginwright 2008; Buckingham 2008; DeGennaro 2008; Hull and Katz 2006; Maira and Soep 2005; Ranieri and Bruni 2013; Valdivia 2011). Despite the growing interest in these programs and in how adults and young people interact in them, much of the extant scholarship focuses on what youth do effectively on their own (Soep 2014), or what adults, rather than youth, do in order to promote or curtail youth agency. We therefore aim to address this gap in the research. Based on our ethnography, we argue that youth also engage in practices in their relationships with adults that promote or curtail their own agency.

We aim to contribute to scholarship on digital media literacy programs, by integrating insights from the theory and practice of critical youth studies into a study that explores how and when young people exercise restraint as a strategy of empowerment in their pedagogical relationships with adults. We worked with two cohorts of early adolescent youth (from communities lacking economic privilege) to create stories about their lives. The summer digital storytelling program built on the foundations of an after-school program in existence for 25 years. Following insights from such leaders in digital media literacy as Goodman (2003) and Soep (2014), our research team endeavored both to strengthen young people's digital media literacy and to lay the foundation for community change by involving them in civic engagement. In this article, we closely examine the processes of negotiation that occurred between youth and adults, so as to suggest a more

nuanced understanding of the choices young people make in such settings and the consequences of those choices.

In the following sections, we review the research design and the scholarship on intergenerational dynamics before closely examining three different types of negotiations that occurred during the production process and the subsequent public screenings of young people's digital stories. We found that the negotiations between adults and youth fell into three categories: minimal negotiation, adult initiated negotiation, and youth initiated negotiation. We argue that the kinds of stories the young people chose to tell made a difference in the types of negotiations that occurred between youth and adults, as stories of youthful resilience led to minimal negotiation, whereas stories in which youth addressed nuanced and personal experiences intensified tensions, sometimes leading adults to set limits or exert control. Within these intergenerational negotiations, youth also encountered difficult but revelatory moments, especially when scripting and sharing their stories, where they initiated negotiations and exercised what we term a form of restraint. We conclude with a discussion of what we believe are the implications for practitioners that arise from these findings.

The summer youth media mentoring project

The young participants in this study were recruited based on their involvement in a year-round after-school program with a commitment to discussing how race intersected with other forms of social and cultural oppression. Adult mentors were recruited into the summer project based on their shared commitments both to social justice and to challenging the ways that white privilege is sustained institutionally. All but two of the adult mentors were White; all but one of the young participants were persons of color, as noted further in the discussion of demographics below. The summer project was designed as an opportunity for a subset of young people to explore their own stories in the context of the after-school program's established commitment to co-constructing critical consciousness in order to participate in activities of social justice. Interested youth were invited to apply to the summer project and were selected by the research team to ensure diverse participation across gender, age, race and neighborhoods. The young people opted into and were paid to participate in the shorter summer project.

Unlike the young people involved in Goodman (2003) and Soep's (2014) efforts, but like many community efforts across the U.S. and elsewhere, young people in this project did not have access to a thriving youth media endeavor in their city. The young people in this project therefore were versed in critical pedagogy but were relative newcomers to media production, and were also several years younger than the young people whose stories were profiled in the work of Goodman (2003) and Soep (2014; Chávez and Soep 2005).

Together, the 18 adults and 16 young participants met weekly for seven weeks during two sessions in subsequent summers, identifying the concerns of these young people and then working together to produce a narrative that the young people would want to share with others. We therefore created spaces for young people and adults to engage in deliberations over the digital story production and public exhibition. We turn to work in critical youth studies for insights on power and authority in intergenerational and differing intersectional collaborations.

Literature review

Relationship between adults and youth in collaborations

Most digital storytelling programs have an 'intergenerational dynamic' in which adults and youth need one another to produce a meaningful story (Buckingham 2009; Chávez and Soep 2005; Hoechsmann and Sefton-Green 2006). Adults typically facilitate the program and in some cases are paired with youth to work with them throughout the production, a situation that has led

Hoechsmann and Sefton-Green (2006) to ask directly, 'How authentic can youth voice be when it emerges from an intergenerational dynamic, however direct or distant that may be?' (187). This concern with adult power and influence has animated a growing body of academic literature focused on how issues of authority that are negotiated between adults and youth (Blum-Ross 2015; Chávez and Soep 2005; Espinet et al. 2011; Fleetwood 2005; Larson et al. 2016; Stack 2009). In these studies, the focus has been on the role, authority, and impact of adults, with much less attention paid to the role, authority, and impact of youth.

The imbalance is in part because adults are often viewed as the ones who solely exercise authority (see, e.g., Halpern 2009; Ozer and Wright 2012) and must intentionally open up space for young people to exercise power and agency. Scholars have described this process as the 'art of restraint.' In a study of 50 youth media organizations, Blum-Ross (2015) identified three roles adults take up in relation to young people within media production programs: 'guides' that emphasize process over output and are hands-off, 'collaborators' that sought an egalitarian dynamic, or 'experts' who rely on their professional skillset and reinforce a traditional hierarchy of power. The methodological approach is similar to Larson et al. (2016) and their interview-based study of 25 experienced adult leaders working with high-school-aged youth. Rather than categorizing types of adult approaches, they found that adult leaders make decisions situationally, sometimes opting to give (or to refrain from giving) advice, sometimes choosing to support youth even when they disagree with their tactics, and sometimes setting limits in order to steer youth around or through potential problems (Larson et al. 2016).

Other researchers highlight symbiotic exchanges between youth and adults and have captured young people's perspectives. Stack (2009) is very clear to say that the space of the digital storytelling production does not alter power relations between young people and adults, but instead creates an opportunity to disrupt certain expectations and to raise questions. As adults limited their interjections and allowed youth greater decision-making authority, adults practiced what Larson et al. (2016) termed the 'art of restraint.' Despite a lack of adult participation in such situations, Stack (2009) found that young people viewed these intergenerational negotiations as more equal, which in turn changed the views adults and youth had of one another. Chávez and Soep (2005) have similarly described a 'pedagogy of collegiality' in which, over time, adults and youth come to depend on one another's experience, skills, and contributions.

As Larson et al. (2016) have described, the art of restraint refers to the need for adults to 'balance support for youth agency with the exercise of adult authority' (845). When adults observed this art of restraint in practice, they either refrained from giving advice (in order to allow youth to experience agency), or they chose to give advice aimed at allowing young people to develop their skills in exercising agency more effectively. Adults thus used their knowledge and authority deliberately, based on their perceptions of youth's needs, goals, and capacities.

While a great deal of research into young people's exercise of agency has focused on the ways they step up to resist power structures (Costanza-Chock 2014; Gordon 2009; Ting 2017), less research has focused on how young people exercise agency in their interpersonal relationships with adults. There is evidence to show that young people can similarly exercise agency by holding back (Coffey and Farrugia 2014). We are interested in using the phrase 'the art of restraint' conceptually: to explore how young people utilize their increased knowledge and authority deliberately, as they consider their own needs and goals and the constraints that they must navigate in order to meet those needs and goals in the context of their work with adults. We aim to explore how and when young people engage in self-censorship, when they refrain from responding or contributing to a joint production process, when they withdraw from activities, or when youth engage in other practices that suggest that they recognize that their own needs and goals may conflict either with those of the adults working with them, or the context in which their work is taking place.

Some studies have shed light on cases in which youth deploy restraint to simultaneously protect and empower themselves. This concept emerges in Kelly's (2018) exploration of the practice of silence in her study on Black girls and Snapchat. We are compelled by the practice of silence or

restraint, which Kelly (2018) views as a form of resistance that is deployed by young Black girls, so that they might continue to get the potential benefits of fitting in, while also building networks of collective identification elsewhere in which to present their 'self-defined' identities. There are other instances in scholarly works where youth tell stories that fit a dominant narrative, in lieu of intimate, nuanced, and true stories as a strategy of resistance (Buckingham 2008; Chan 2006; Dahya 2017; Dahya and Jenson 2015). But how does silence or restraint on the part of young people shape their experiences with agency, empowerment, and negotiations with adults? In an attempt to answer this question, we seek to unify and identify these practices as 'the art of youthful restraint,' whereby young people take up authority, protect themselves, and have influence in the negotiation and storytelling process by withholding, selecting, or altering parts of their experience and story.

Because most programs of digital media literacy involve situations in which young people are interacting with adult leaders, we argue that the practice of ' youthful restraint' in negotiations with more powerful adults, is a strategic component of the development of digital media literacy and youth voice. Moreover, this practice can also be a useful strategy that translates well from settings of digital media literacy, into those of interactions with policymakers and other adults who wield decision making power.

Methods

To examine our question of how young people and adults influence their relationships and how youth learn to practice restraint, this article explores the processes and patterns that emerged in authority relations between youth and adults, as they engaged together in a collaborative digital media storytelling project.

As noted earlier, there were 16 young people and 18 adults involved in the summer projects. The first-year cohort had 11 youth, the second-year cohort had 10 youth, and 6 of the young people participated in both summers. Of the total youth who participated, there were 8 females and 8 males. The young people identified as Black (10), white (2), Asian (2), and Latinx (2).

A graduate student observer took detailed field notes of youth and adult interactions during program sessions. Additionally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 of the young people and 8 adult mentors. The interview guide was designed to elicit information on how youth and adults each experienced interactions and moments of negotiation over the selection of story ideas and decisions about the script, images, music, pacing, and editing.

All notes and transcriptions were coded using Dedoose software for Qualitative Coding, with analysis triangulated as at least two researchers coded and the entire research team reviewed coded materials, in order to establish consistent application of codes to data. To strengthen theoretical validity, we discussed discrepant data that did not fit into the codes or the developing framework.

Overall, we sought to understand the micro-negotiations of power between youth and adults from traditional power to shared decision-making. In the discussion section, we will focus our analysis on the intergenerational communication between young people and adults.

Findings

Analysis of the digital storytelling production process and subsequent public screenings helped to identify three different types of negotiations between youth and adults: minimal negotiation, adult-initiated negotiation, and youth-initiated negotiation. The type of story that the young person chose to tell gave shape to the type of negotiations that took place between young people and adults and the level of empowerment young people experienced. We observed different implications for critical digital media literacy and the expression of youth voice in relation to each type of negotiation.

Stories of resilience led to minimal negotiation between adults and youth. We observed that many of the young people chose to disrupt stereotypical images of victimhood or of violence by

telling stories of individual and community resilience, thus demonstrating that they understood media conventions and representational practices and worked to counter stereotypes. In cases where young people and their mentors agreed on the use of these conventions, there was little disagreement and thus young people did not need to exercise restraint in their interactions with their adult mentors. However, whereas young people in these situations did not need to exercise restraint, they also did not address structural and systemic issues of power inequities. This had the benefit of reduced conflict and a strong sense of supported youth voice and agency, but it came at a cost of reduced opportunities for discussing stereotypical storylines, and thus weakened opportunities for the development of a *critical competency*. Focusing on a success story that highlighted the resilience of the individual and community did not also allow for a critique of relationships between meaning, societal structure, and power.

Stories that tackled nuanced and personal experiences intensified tensions between adults and youth, and whereas sometimes young people initiated negotiations, more often adults intervened unilaterally in ways that potentially hindered a sense of empowerment. Conflict could increase, but disagreements provided opportunities for young people to experiment with exercising agency over how their stories would be told. This situation opened the possibility for the development of *participatory* and sometimes *collaborative* competencies.

Young people also experienced moments where they needed to exercise restraint. During scripting and public screenings, as they witnessed the effects that their exercise of youth voice had on others, this, too, contributed to enhanced critical media literacy, particularly in relation to the development of *expressive* competency. In our discussion that follows, we elaborate on how youthful restraint was practiced and what impact it had on the development of critical digital media literacy and the expression of youth voice.

Stories of resilience and minimal negotiation: Louis, Hamza, Fatima and Perry

This section introduces four young people who told stories of their own resilience, success, and the help they received from others (Table 1). Louis told a story about how he prepared for an audition for a selective performing arts school, how his mother provided assistance when he needed it, and how he ultimately succeeded in securing his spot in the school. Hamza similarly told a story of how his academic mentor helped him to achieve in school. A third story shared by Fatima was about a social worker who provided personal encouragement that was important in helping her to feel that she could flourish. Perry, who identified as a recent immigrant from Southeast Asia, highlighted the sacrifices his parents had made in order to open possibilities for his family. Louis identified as African American, Hamza and Fatima identified as recent immigrants from East African countries, and Perry identified as a recent immigrant from Southeast Asia.

While their adult mentors made suggestions, provided technical expertise and practiced restraint, youth saw themselves as having decisive control of their story, and felt that they alone were experts on their lives. Their perception of adults also changed over the course of the project.

Table 1. Participants, stories, and types of negotiation over power and authority for the following section.

Youth	Story	Negotiation of power and authority
Louis	Overcoming difficulty to gain admission into prestigious music program	Louis worried that the adult might take over but said he found he instead provided 'good advice' as Louis felt he retained power over how his story was told
Hamza	Academic mentor helped him overcome difficulty to achieve in school	Hamza liked having the chance to make his own decisions, even though he conceded that his ending, over which he exercised authority, 'wasn't the best'
Fatima	Social worker provided support to her, which enabled her to succeed	Adults devoted more power and authority in the completion of the project as Fatima lost interest
Perry	Parents sacrificed in order to support his success	Perry appreciated the technical support of his mentor as Perry exercised power and authority over the story

Adults came to be viewed not simply as authority figures, but instead as collaborators, advisors, and supporters. Almost all of youth participants who told stories of resilience affirmed that they felt they had the final say in their story:

I: Yeah so who had the final decision in your video?
Benjamin: I did.
Hamza: Me.
[…]
Fatima: I got to make a lot of decisions.
Afiya: I got to make a lot of decisions too.
            In one instance, Louis was very clear about his sense of control in relation to his mentor:
I: And then did you ever disagree with your partner?
Louis: Hecks yes.
I: Yeah? Talk to me about that Louis.
Louis: He would he would always like try to like when he was making like those suggestions some sug-gestions I didn't like but I was like 'nope sorry we're not doing that.'
I: So you just like you heard him out, you heard him out but you said no thanks?
Louis: Yeah.

In these situations, adults supported the young people and praised them for their positive stories. Left unexamined were the ways that these stories, like many commercially produced narratives, reinforced stereotypes of 'model minorities' who overcome difficulties in order to succeed as individuals. Examinations of structural constraints or systemic experiences of oppression were left out of these stories, and out of the discussion. In this sense, an opportunity for the development of critical competence through engagement with media texts and the ways they reproduce stereotypes was missed.

Unresolved endings and adult initiated negotiation: Huzef and Benjamin

Some stories young people wanted to tell were more personal and did not fit a 'model minority' storyline or a clear genre, and in these cases, young people and adults had a more difficult time negotiating the narrative elements (Table 2). It often meant adults subdued young people's ability to exercise authority effectively over their own stories.

Adult interventions occurred under two different conditions: when elements of stories that young people wanted to tell were deemed to be potentially problematic for an adult audience, and when the stories were deemed too self-revelatory and thus might put the young person at risk in some way. In each of these cases, the young people had chosen to tell stories about difficulties they had experienced personally or were currently experiencing.

Huzef, whose family immigrated to the U.S. from East Africa, wanted to tell a story about a negative encounter he had with a violent dog in his neighborhood, where drug deals and violence occurred frequently. Wanting to elicit humor, Huzef included an image in his story that showed a person being 'bit in the butt,' as he described it, by one of the dogs. His adult mentor noted his concern that the inclusion of this image would be discordant with the serious issue at the

Table 2. Participants, stories, and types of negotiation over power and authority for the following section.

Youth	Story	Negotiation of power and authority
Benjamin	Story of adventures he had with a best friend (Story of two Benjamin's)	Adult exercised power by shaping the story based on what she felt was an appropriate story genre and ending. Benjamin expressed that he still felt that it was 'his story,' and thus he maintained some sense of power and authority
Huzef	The need to avoid violent dogs in the neighborhood	Huzef reluctantly ceded power over part of the story, but later conceded the adult's intervention was helpful in relation to his attempt at humor ('dog bites butt') and recognized the adult's intervention positively influenced the meaning he wanted the audience to take from the story

heart of the narrative. The adult therefore encouraged Huzef to drop this image. The young person tried to justify the image's inclusion, but in the end, he yielded to his mentor. When Huzef's video was screened, he was pleased that his story did elicit a number of laughs, and in an interview after the screening he further understood the reason his mentor mentioned that the dog-biting image might not be viewed in the way that he had intended.

I::	What was the disagreement?
Huzef:	About pictures like sometimes I put a picture of something gettin' bit in the booty (laughter) but he said that's a little bit inappropriate so I said ok.
I:	So you agreed, I mean you saw his point?
Huzef:	I saw his point but I tried to fight like a little bit. I was like please please, like it'll be funny. It's not and he was like 'imagine if the person who got bit in the booty was there' and I was like ok.

There was another case in which a tension flared up over the ending of a story and adult authority was evoked to subdue the authority of youth. Interviews with Benjamin and his adult mentor revealed that while the mentor, a white woman, favored a storyline of overcoming difficulty (like those stories told by Louis, Hamza, Fatima, and Perry) Benjamin, an East African immigrant, did not. He indicated that he had wanted to tell a different kind of story, where the end was not entirely resolved. In a follow-up interview, Benjamin reflected on his experience with his mentor:

Benjamin:	I hate how we had to say how this guy or the person or the thing impacted you.
I:	and what was the disagreement?
Benjamin:	How I had to say 'and this is why he is my role model.'
I:	You didn't wanna do that or what?
Benjamin:	Yeah I didn't wanna do that.
I:	So what did you do after all? How did you guys resolve it?
Benjamin:	I still had to do it.
I:	(laughter) how did you feel about that?
Benjamin:	I felt embarrassed

When Benjamin came to the end of his script, his adult mentor told him that the ending needed more, perhaps because she did not feel that the ending conformed to audience or narrative expectations. She therefore scripted an ending for him, which he reluctantly accepted, conceding that she knew more about storytelling than he did. Benjamin's story did reflect well on him as judged by positive audience response, but he seemed to resent the imposition of a particular narrative structure on his story. The embarrassed feelings on the part of Benjamin may have reflected a sense of being displeased when faced with the limits of genre in digital storytelling. While Huzef was able to enhance his competencies in collaboration and expression and left open the possibility for critical reflection on his lived experience, Benjamin's experience provided exposure to the limiting structure of storytelling thus priming him for an enhanced critical competency.

Self-censored stories and youth-initiated negotiation: Afiya, Alejandra, and Hamza

Three youth engaged in what we term the art of youthful restraint (Table 3). Afiya, an immigrant from a refugee camp in East Africa, told a story about discrimination and bullying based on her racial and religious identities. Alejandra, a Latina, told a story about an academic support program that she had participated in. We revisit Hamza in this section as well, for his use of restraint in editing his story about his academic mentor.

Afiya decided that she wanted to tell a story about being bullied at school for being Muslim. Her mentor, a white woman who was an experienced media storyteller, was attentive to audience expectations and gave Afiya the courage to tell a nuanced but very difficult personal story about racism. Afiya's story demonstrated critical and expressive competencies, and was positively received by her peers and by the wider audience of adults as both heartbreaking and inspiring. But while the

Table 3. Participants, stories, and types of negotiation over power and authority for the following section.

Youth	Story	Negotiation of power and authority
Afiya	Bullied at school	Adult exercised power by encouraging the sharing of the story Afiya suggested; Afiya later reclaimed power by changing her mind about the story and by refusing to screen it
Alejandra	Middle school youth leadership program	Alejandra exercised power and authority over the production of her story but later perceived that the story she selected 'wasn't serious enough,' thus questioning her exercise of authority and claiming the power to refuse to screen it
Hamza	Academic mentor helped him overcome difficulty to achieve in school	Hamza liked having the chance to make his own decisions, even though he conceded that his ending, over which he exercised authority, 'wasn't the best'

audiences experienced it positively, to our surprise, Afiya did not. After its first public screening, Afiya decided not to screen it again for any audience. At the exhibition of the story in front of her peers, Afiya may have recognized that she, with her mentor's support, had crafted a public identity of herself as a victim. While the experience was authentic and hers, it was not a story that she wanted to tell.

Another youth, Alejandra, decided not to screen her digital story at the first public exhibition after having screened it for her peers, as she believed that it was not of the same serious caliber as others. Additionally, in conversations with her mentor, Alejandra shared that she kept her story very surface-level because she perceived her 'real life' to be very private and 'no one else's business.'

Hamza, who we mentioned earlier, changed the way he saw his own story after seeing people's reactions at the public screening. Hamza was hesitant about screening his story after the first peer-screening: he had decided that at the end of his digital story, to sit in front of a green screen and talk directly to his audience, he called on his audience to 'like and subscribe,' giving a wink at the very end of his video. Hamza was emulating YouTube celebrities (or YouTubers), but there was a burst of laughter from the audience that he had not intended or expected. As a result of this response, during the first public screening, he left the room so as to avoid any and all audience reactions. When Hamza was asked to share his story with the next cohort he agreed, but during the screening he did something unexpected – he stopped the video right before his YouTuber-inspired wink. Even though he and his mentor did not engage in a critical discussion of his work, he exhibited enhanced expressive competency in his recognition of how his video might be better received.

By choosing not to share all or parts of their stories, these youth exercised their power over the telling of their stories and themselves. They practiced their own version of restraint, in this case a form of situational self-censorship, recognizing that although there were adult expectations of them as participants in this project and as young people, their stories were not fixed, but rather, subject to revision on an ongoing basis, no matter the context or format. We argue that this recognition enabled the young people to gain a deepened understanding of what it means to demonstrate participatory competence: they were able to exercise agency over how, and in which contexts, their own stories could come to matter in public settings. We elaborate on this finding below.

Discussion

The art of youthful restraint

Consistent with previous research, we found that adults were able to primarily select their role and influence the intergenerational collaboration unilaterally or through restraint (Larson et al. 2016). The focus on youth in this article, however, gives attention to the ways in which youth simultaneously and actively influenced the digital storytelling process and collaboration. Within the intergenerational relationship, the very stories youth selected (resilience or unresolved endings)

influenced the type of negotiations and mentor they would experience and/or need. In stories of resilience both the adults and youth came to appreciate collaboration, and young people saw themselves as being able to offer unrestricted direction to the project. Adults in these cases tended to vacillate between what Blum-Ross (2015) termed *guide* and *collaborator* roles. Since the majority of young people often felt comfortable with their level of control and decision-making, the storytelling process was mostly frictionless, with a few exceptions. While providing a strong sense of agency, it limited the development of a critical competency as few issues needed to be negotiated or explored more deeply. When stories departed from a familiar narrative, adults chose to exert more authority, adopting positions somewhat between what Blum-Ross (2015) termed *collaborator* and *expert*, and they risked subduing the young person's agency. Youth were thus more likely to experience tension in the negotiating process and limits to their agency, but the tensions simultaneously opened up opportunities for the development of collaboration, expression, and critical competencies.

The story young people chose to tell didn't necessarily determine when, how, or if the young person might engage in restraint. In fact, each of the stories by youth who engaged in restraint surprisingly fell into the category of resilience, which as we know was mostly frictionless. When and how Afiya, Alejandra, and Hamza practiced restraint thus revealed two interesting characteristics about youthful restraint. One, youth recognize that the message or story about themselves that they made public isn't reflecting on them in the way they had originally thought so they take back control. Two, restraint appears to occur at a moment when a young person attains a systemic awareness and enhanced digital media literacy revealing their understanding of the relationship between themselves, the production of meaning, societal structure, and power.

Some might argue that when young people practice the art of restraint, they are either withdrawing and therefore failing to understand the system around them, or perhaps passively yielding to adult authority. However, to read young people's restraint in this way would be an error, especially among young people of color. What our study found is that through these experiences of exercising restraint and then weighing the consequences of their actions, young people achieved a heightened sense of empowerment and digital media literacy. Practicing restraint was an exercise of power that enabled them to stay involved in the production process according to their comfort level. In particular, the pitfalls experienced by Afiya and Hamza helped them understand where in the communication process they deviated which then gave rise to the possibility that they could figure out how to use story selection and restraint most effectively to retake control of their story in the future. Alejandra avoided the pitfalls from the outset, perhaps having previously learned a lesson similar to Afiya.

Aside from story selection, youth also practiced restraint during the most unexpected part of the digital storytelling project, the public screenings. This act of restraint inadvertently taught young people a systemic understanding of the communication process: that the mediated messages they put out into society have real impacts for themselves and for others. More importantly, even when their video was final (exported and saved), and they had agreed to screen it, they could change their minds at the last minute. Young people showed that even when communications, identities, and relationships (or video messages) seem fixed, linear, or finalized, they were still free to disagree, revise, and practice restraint. If young people understand that they can change their minds, and that information can be continually negotiated, then they can view themselves as agentive and powerful within society and through processes of communication.

Hamza censored the last part of his story, since his identity as a would-be celebrity did not receive the response he had anticipated. Like Afiya, he disagreed with the final product. This, we argue, is not a negative lesson about young people, but a beneficial outcome for youth of color who come from communities that have been historically marginalized and frequently misunderstood in media and in public and political life. In essence, with each public showing, young people can increasingly take control of their story, their representation, and, as a result, their identity by controlling what the public sees and hears about them. They are also buying time through restraint

to continue to learn the system of communication and to identify opportunities that limit their vulnerability and maximize impact.

Restraint is thus a defensive reaction, but also be an agentive practice in which youth both continue to learn the system around them and identify opportunities for future action that might leave them less vulnerable. Youth of color also create more time for themselves, both to observe the system around them, and to protect their mental health, privacy, and identity development. Restraint is therefore not an abdication of agency. Restraint is an ongoing and strategic practice for youth of color: they must protect themselves from systemic injustices, in order to build up enough endurance and understanding for the laborious struggle of rectifying an unjust system.

We believe that these lessons were possible in part because of the supportive environment fostered in the afterschool program, in which young people in our study were regular participants. However, future research is needed to explore how differences of race and social status played into the tactics youth employed. The research also was limited to exploring cases in which youth were encouraged to share stories related to experiences of struggle, as the project sought to bolster the year-long approach that seeks to connect personal suffering with collective responses. Future research could explore the costs and benefits of affording young people greater agency in selecting the story they want to tell and how they want to tell it. Whereas this study seeks to contribute to digital media literacy research through the lens of critical youth studies in its heightened attention to youth decision-making processes, further work can tease out the ways that adults can work with one another and with youth, to best support different tactics for achieving their goals.

Implications

The social and institutional segregation of people based on age too often limits contact between youth and adults (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2006). Rare are the spaces where young people are given the type of authority typically reserved for adults. However, our work underscores the importance of understanding how young people do exercise agency, in particular through the exercise of restraint, when they are engaged with adults in joint efforts. Such situations, rare as they may be, offer opportunities for young people to explore different tactics, including those of restraint, that can be utilized when young people interact with adults to meet their own goals and needs. As a qualitative study, our aim was not to identify generalized findings but rather to point to processes that are in need of further investigation and understanding. The implications of this research are therefore relevant beyond the context of digital storytelling, and include broader, longstanding concerns within all Youth Participatory Action Research projects. Programs pairing adults with young people should afford space both for adults to reflect on the ways that they may enhance or hinder youth agency, and for young people to reflect on their choices and the outcomes of those choices. Such reflections can offer both young people and adults opportunities to consider how agency can be exercised, as both goals and situations change.

Research has established the widespread lack of awareness of how media systems work, a lack that supports the spread of misinformation among not only young people but across age groups (Polizzi and Taylor 2019; Wineburg et al. 2016). Additional research is underway that is exploring the efficacy of YPAR efforts in bringing about policy and platform change, and that is exploring the role of critical media literacy in developing in citizens a sense of their right to demand that systems need to, and must, change in order to support greater equity (Mihailidis, Ramasubramanian, and Tully 2020). We hope that our focus on youth restraint as a strategy of empowerment contributes to this work.

Conclusion

Today, many scholars working in critical media literacy operate under the assumption that involvement in digital media literacy programs leads to empowerment, skill acquisition, and

communication competence (Mihailidis and Thevenin 2013). Yet concepts of empowerment, critical media literacy and youth voice must be grounded in the practices of youth media production, as Blum-Ross (2017) has argued. This article has taken up Blum-Ross' challenge, analyzing in greater depth how youth influence the negotiation process with adults in a setting of youth and adult media co-production that was framed in relation to the critical pedagogies of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). We aimed to better understand how these processes of adult/youth negotiation played out in relation to critical media literacy, youth voice, and empowerment among youth.

We found that young participants in this study exercised agency and demonstrated enhanced critical digital media literacy and the expression of youth voice as the project moved through distinct phases. First, they exercised control over choosing and developing their story; second, they witnessed how their story was experienced by audiences; and third, processing the experience of the public exhibitions, some youth achieved a heightened sense of digital media literacy and exercised control over their story and its distribution in an effort to further refine the impact, or lack thereof, they desired to have on their public audiences and themselves. We also identified patterns in the situations in which youth choose to hold back. We described these as actions as acts of youthful restraint, whereby young people take up authority, protect themselves, and have influence in the negotiation and storytelling process by withholding, selecting, or altering parts of their experience and story. As young people developed a greater sense of the communication process and a sense of the ways in which sharing their story made them vulnerable, young participants practiced an even more strategic form of restraint during screenings, thereby exhibiting enhanced understandings of media consumption processes and a deeper understanding of the efficacy of sharing stories of youth experiences among adult stakeholders.

Future research is needed to tease out the implications of these findings for adults who wish to support the development of critical media literacy, youth empowerment, and the exercise of youth voice. But our data suggest that young people, through their story choices and their exercise of restraint, gave shape to the type of mentoring and contexts they needed in order to express their lived experiences in storytelling, which also influenced the types of negotiations with adults that followed. We also found that the stories with unresolved endings or themes of victimization which focused on important moments or trauma, more so than those stories of resilience, required more involvement by the adult – not only to help process, but to shape the stories in a way that would be accessible to a public audience and empower youth. This, we argue, points to the importance of mentor training not only in critical pedagogies and in media storytelling, but also in the languages of systemic oppression, social justice, and trauma-informed practices.

But there is more to explore regarding questions of restraint as they occur within a collaborative or 'collegial pedagogy' approach, to use Soep's phrase. Restraint, we suggest, is a vital element of digital media literacy, as the concept of restraint recognizes that young people have multiple ways in which they exercise authority in co-producing relationships. We have attempted to flesh out this concept of restraint in an effort to complicate binary concepts of agency that might suggest that in situations of co-production, adults either act as partners or as patronizing oppressors, and that young people might similarly engage either as partners or as wholesale resisters. We wanted to explore how young people exerted agency and authority in specific situations of co-production so as to develop more language for how and when such exertions might occur and what they might mean for young people in the immediate situations of co-production as well as in later varied viewing contexts. We took this route so as to provide ways for adults to broaden their understanding of how youth may be responding to their partnership efforts, and how adults might consider actions that would be considered by young people to be more respectful and encouraging of their own views and knowledge. We suggest that such learnings can translate into other civic and public settings in which youth seek to exert agency, which may be an important step toward understanding themselves as contributors to the changes in society that they wish to bring about.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

References

Akom, A. A., J. Cammarota, and S. Ginwright. 2008. "Youthtopias: Towards a New Paradigm of Critical Youth Studies." *Youth Media Reporter* 2 (4): 1–30.

Anderson, K. M., and R. Mack. 2017. "Digital Storytelling: A Narrative Method for Positive Identity Development in Minority Youth." *Social Work with Groups* 42 (1): 43–55. doi:10.1080/01609513.2017.1413616.

Bailey, J., V. Steeves, L. R. Shade, R. Ruparelia, and P. Regan. 2019. "Getting at Equality: Research Methods Informed by the Lessons of Intersectionality." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 18: 1–3. doi:10.1177/1609406919846753.

Blum-Ross, A. 2015. "Filmmakers/Educators/Facilitators? Understanding the Role of Adult Intermediaries in Youth Media Production in the UK and the USA." *Journal of Children and Media* 9 (3): 308–324. doi:10.1080/17482798.2015.1058280.

Blum-Ross, A. 2017. "Voice, Empowerment, and Youth-Produced Films About 'Gangs'." *Learning, Media & Technology* 42 (1). Available online: doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/17439884.2016.1111240.

Buckingham, D. 2003. *Media education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Buckingham, D. 2008. "Introducing Identity." In *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*, edited by D. Buckingham, 1–24. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Buckingham, D. 2009. "'Creative' Visual Methods in Media Research: Possibilities, Problems and Proposals." *Media, Culture and Society* 31 (4): 633–652.

Cammarota, J., and M. Fine. 2010. *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion*. New York: Routledge.

Cerecer, D. A. Q., C. Cahill, and M. Bradley. 2013. "Toward a Critical Youth Policy Praxis: Critical Youth Studies and Participatory Action Research." *Theory Into Practice* 52 (3): 216–223. doi:10.1080/00405841.2013.804316.

Chan, C. 2006. "Youth Voice? Whose Voice? Young People and Youth Media Practice in Hong Kong." *McGill Journal of Education* 41 (3): 215–225.

Chávez, V., and E. Soep. 2005. "Youth Radio and The Pedagogy of Collegiality." *Harvard Educational Review* 75 (4): 409–434.

Chavez, V., and E. Soep. 2010. *Drop That Knowledge: Youth Radio Stories*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Coffey, J., and D. Farrugia. 2014. "Unpacking the Black Box: The Problem of Agency in the Sociology of Youth." *Journal of Youth Studies* 17 (4): 461–474. doi:10.1080/13676261.2013.830707.

Costanza-Chock, S. 2014. *Out of the Shadows, into the Streets! Transmedia Organizing and the Immigrant Rights Movement* (SSRN Scholarly Paper No. ID 2516003). Social Science Research Network website: https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2516003.

Dahya, N. 2017. "Critical Perspectives on Youth Digital Media Production: 'Voice' and Representation in Educational Contexts." *Learning, Media and Technology* 42 (1): 100–111. doi:10.1080/17439884.2016.1141785.

Dahya, N., and J. Jenson. 2015. "Mis/Representations in School-Based Digital Media Production: An Ethnographic Exploration with Muslim Girls." *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* 9 (2): 108–123.

DeGennaro, D. 2008. "The Dialectics Informing Identity in an Urban Youth Digital Storytelling Workshop." *E-Learning and Digital Media* 5 (4): 429–444. doi:10.2304/elea.2008.5.4.429.

Delgado, M., and L. Staples. 2008. *Youth-led Community Organizing: Theory and Action*. https://www.amazon.com/Youth-Led-Community-Organizing-Theory-Action/dp/0195182766.

Espinet, I. W. C. F., K. Paron, L. Denerstein, and S. Hyte. 2011. "Changing Hats: From Practitioners to Practitioner-Researchers." In *International Perspectives on Youth and Media*, edited by J. Fisherkeller, 155–171. New York: Peter Lang.

Fleetwood, N. R. 2005. "Mediating Youth: Community-Based Video Production and the Politics of Race and Authenticity." *Social Text* 23: 83–109. doi:10.1215/01642472-23-1_82-83.

Ginwright, S., and T. James. 2002. "From Assets to Agents of Change: Social Justice, Organizing, and Youth Development." *New Directions for Youth Development: Theory, Practice, Research* 96: 27–46.

Goodman, S. 2003. *Teaching Youth Media: A Critical Guide to Literacy, Video Production, and Social Change*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Gordon, H. 2009. *We Fight to Win: Inequality and the Politics of Youth Activism*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Hagestad, G. O., and P. Uhlenberg. 2006. "Should We be Concerned About Age Segregation? Some Theoretical and Empirical Explorations." *Research on Aging* 28 (6): 638–653.

Halpern, R. 2009. *The Means to Grow Up: Reinventing Apprenticeship as a Developmental Support in Adolescence*. New York: Routledge.

Hoechsmann, M., and J. Sefton-Green. 2006. "Editorial: Listen Up! Young People and Media Production." *McGill Journal of Education* 41 (3): 187–195.

Hull, G. A., and M. L. Katz. 2006. "Crafting an Agentive Self: Case Studies of Digital Storytelling." *Research in the Teaching of English* 41 (1): 43.

Kelly, L. L. 2018. "A Snapchat Story: How Black Girls Develop Strategies for Critical Resistance in School." *Learning, Media and Technology* 43 (4): 374–389.

Larson, R. W., D. Izenstark, G. Rodriguez, and S. C. Perry. 2016. "The Art of Restraint: How Experienced Program Leaders Use Their Authority to Support Youth Agency." *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 26 (4): 845–863. doi:10.1111/jora.12234.

Maira, S., and E. Soep. 2005. *Youthscapes: The Popular, The National, The Global*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Mihailidis, P., S. Ramasubramanian, and M. Tully. 2020. *Mapping Impactful Media Literacy Project*. https://www.mappingimpactfulml.org/.

Mihailidis, P., and B. Thevenin. 2013. "Media Literacy as a Core Competency for Engaged Citizenship in Participatory Democracy." *American Behavioral Scientist* 57 (11): 1611–1622.

Ozer, E. J., and D. Wright. 2012. "Beyond School Spirit: The Effects of Youth-Led Participatory Action Research in Two Urban High Schools." *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 22: 267–283.

Polizzi, G., and R. Taylor. 2019. "Misinformation, Digital Literacy and the School Curriculum." *Media Policy briefs 22*. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/101083/.

Ranieri, M., and I. Bruni. 2013. "Mobile Storytelling and Informal Education in a Suburban Area: A Qualitative Study on the Potential of Digital Narratives for Young Second-Generation Immigrants." *Learning, Media and Technology* 38 (2): 217–235. doi:10.1080/17439884.2013.724073.

Soep, E. 2006. "Youth media citizenship: Beyond youth voice." *Afterschool Matters* 5 (Spring): 1–11.

Soep, E. 2014. *Participatory Politics: Next Generation Tactics to Remake Public Spheres*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Stack, M. 2009. "Video Production and Youth-Educator Collaboration: Openings Aand Dilemmas." *McGill Journal of Education* 44: 299–318. doi:10.7202/039038ar.

Ting, T. 2017. "Struggling for Tomorrow: The Future Orientations of Youth Activism in a Democratic Crisis." *Contemporary Social Science* 12 (3–4): 242–257. doi:10.1080/21582041.2017.1385827.

Valdivia, A. N. 2011. "This Tween Bridge Over My Latina Girl Back: The U.S. Mainstream Negotiates Ethnicity." In *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*, edited by M. C. Kearney, 93–112. https://experts.illinois.edu/en/publications/this-tween-bridge-over-my-latina-girl-back-the-us-mainstream-nego.

Wineburg, S., S. Mcgrew, J. Breakstone, and T. Ortega. 2016. *Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning*. Stanford Digital Repository. http://purl.stanford.edu/fv751yt5934.