

Learning Together: Reflections at the Intersection of Friendship, Research, and Learning Processes

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Abstract: A growing subset of the learning sciences centers how relationality supports meaningful sense-making. Some of this work focuses specifically on friendships, a relational form in which participants share a historical, emotional, social, and cultural intersubjectivity. We wish to re-focus this research in the learning sciences by exploring three kinds of friendships within the field (researcher-researcher, researcher-collaborator, and participant-participant) to understand how these relational forms emerged and expanded our thinking and ways of being. We argue politicized trust and ethical vulnerability are important components of learning in friendships. We offer potential implications for the learning sciences to further our goals of developing theoretically validated, politically explicit, ethically laden theories and designs of learning.

Lauren called Ava to do some much needed catching up. The two friends talked for over an hour, divulging the emotional depths of their most recent grad. school experiences, there seemed to be an endless supply. Ava shared that their conversation on the meaning of “political” in research had really helped her think about the political and ethical dimensions of learning in new ways. They talked about how nice it was to have each other as sounding boards in this process of academic apprenticeship, recounting how they’ve pushed each other in sincere and helpful ways, and checking in on their development into the academics they dreamed of being. Ava asked, “Has anyone ever talked about how researcher friendships impact the work that we do?” They weren’t sure, but discussed many learning scientists they looked up to who write together in powerful ways. Lauren made a suggestion, “We should write a paper on our friendship, talk about consequential learning!” Lauren could hear Ava nodding all the way in Evanston: “We should!”

Introduction: Relationality, friendship, and learning

Significant research in the learning sciences has explored the unique affordances friendships have in expanding student participation, creating more trusting and joyful experiences because of the history and intersubjectivity already grounded between participants (Takeuchi, 2016; Vossoughi et al., 2020). This work has demonstrated the political and ethical implications of friendships within learning for lessening stereotype threat and oppressive social environments that often shape the experiences of marginalized youth (Thompson, 2014) and deepening forms of relationality that value collective ways of being and promote self- and collective-cultivation (Vossoughi et al., 2020; Stephens, 2014). Although we have a strong understanding of the power of relationships in mediating learning, the role of friendship in academia itself, and the ways these relational constructs can positively impact our work as a scientific community have mostly been undertheorized. As graduate students, we see this as particularly important for the learning sciences; if we take seriously the field’s goals for furthering our understanding of learning in order to better design and support the development of all people, we must consider the multitude of ways we can best work towards this goal, including supporting productive forms of relationality that directly expand and nuance our theorizing and analysis. In this paper, which offers an interaction analytic exploration of six cases of friendships, we hope to start this conversation on what friendships look like in the learning sciences, how they emerge, and how they impact the work we do.

Relationality focuses on the ways people relate to others, objects, nature, and the larger world and has been used to understand how relationships mediate forms of sense-making and knowledge building, as well as the identities and ways of being made available (Hall & Stevens, 2015; Nasir & Cooks, 2009). Friendships are particular forms of relationality in which participants share a historical, emotional, social, and cultural intersubjectivity. When this intersubjectivity is built, novice students in an activity are frequently positioned as experts and co-thinkers, supporting more legitimate forms of participation and students’ educational dignity through taking seriously of one’s mind (Takeuchi, 2016; Vossoughi et al., 2020). This is not to say learning

cannot happen outside of friendships (Sengupta-Irving, 2009). Rather, the learning fostered within friendships appears to more readily sustain a form of intimacy and vulnerability that results in consequential learning relations sustained over time and across contexts (Hall & Jurow, 2015). Some work has explored the relationships between researchers and teachers or community partners as more than research transactions. When these partnerships are built or foster friendships, greater opportunities can arise for “attending to the political and theoretical history of the project *as tied to* the personal histories of participants [providing] crucial insight into the values, goals, processes, and outcomes of learning within the project and partnership itself” (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). We wish to explore how these kinds of relational intersubjectivities emerge and impact our work as learning scientists.

Methodological process

After our initial conversation, we began to discuss how building friendships were integral to how we both conducted research and to the learning we were observing. Conversations with friends in other learning sciences doctoral programs, led to coming together to think through these ideas systematically. Drawing upon sociocultural and critical theories of learning (Esmonde & Booker, 2016), we theorized and analyzed the role of friendship using ethnographic (Erickson, 1992) and auto-ethnographic (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010) methodologies. We narrowed our focus to three friendship categories: researcher-researcher, researcher-collaborator, and participant-participant. For researcher-researcher, Ava and Lauren and Naomi and Suraj drew upon auto-ethnographic methods to aggregate artifacts (co-authored work, notes, and text messages) and self-reflections. For researcher-collaborator, Lauren and Heather drew upon interviews, fieldnotes, and video data from their respective long-term collaborative research projects. For participant-participant, Ava and Lindsay analyzed fieldnotes and interviews from their research projects to interrogate the role of friendship between youth participants. First, we engaged in grounded theory coding (Charmaz, 2006) within each category to trace the emergence and impact of friendships across various data sets by focusing on intersubjectivity as our unit of analysis. Once we developed key themes, we explored patterns and discrepancies across categories and themes. Guided by continued process coding and relevant literature, we refined these themes into an initial argument on how friendship is fostered within the learning sciences and the impact of this relational construct on our work.

Initial findings

We noticed two central constructs that were present in all emergences of friendships across our data sets: politicized trust and ethical vulnerability. Politicized trust reflects the particular qualities necessary for building “respectful and mutually reciprocal relationships,” (Vakil & McKinney de Royston, 2019, p. 459) specifically between communities and researchers. These qualities include a foundation of political understanding, respect, and solidarity (ibid.), and the need for iterative “critical reflection and ongoing renewal of relationships,” (Bang, Montañó Nolan, & McDaid-Morgan, 2018). Once this kind of trust was established, friends were able to expose personal thoughts and feelings. We call this ethical vulnerability, which afforded an openness not only to the content of learning, but also the ways meaningful developmental pathways grew. Politicized trust laid the groundwork for ethical vulnerability in which friends were expected to attend to these vulnerabilities with politicized care (McKinney de Royston, Vakil, Ross, Givens, & Holman, 2017) and an intersubjective sense of responsibility.

Politicized trust

As friendships deepened, we noticed a politicized trust developing in the ways individuals attended to each other and the racialized and powered systems that encompass our worlds. As shown in the opening vignette, Ava and Lauren frequently engaged conversations central to their work and identities as scholars. In these conversations, they shared intimate details on their experiences in the academy, discussing the racialized and gendered ways they were making sense of both their developing research agendas (i.e. their discussions on the theoretical and material meaning of the ‘political’ in the learning sciences) and their own experiences negotiating new ways of being critical and community-based researchers. This trust in sharing questions and experiences was only possible because of an intentional effort to understand how their experiences as graduate students were part of larger systems of power, building an intersubjectivity that tied their microgenetic experiences to macro systems of hegemony.

This politicized trust also appeared to emerge in our analysis of researcher-collaborator friendships. Take for example Heather and Ms. B (a middle school science teacher), whose developing friendship led them to design a larger and more cohesive curriculum than originally planned because they did not see their relationship as only contributing to the research produced. Originally, they had only planned to work on two units that Heather was scheduled to collect data on. However, after spending hours together in and out of the

classroom, watching each other run with ideas and treating youth with respect and dignity, Ms. B trusted Heather and invited her to collaborate on curriculum for the whole year. In turn, not only did Ms. B and her students benefit, but also the two units researched fit into a more cohesive curriculum. Without their friendship, however, is it unlikely that Ms. B would have taken such a risk and opened up her teaching practice for the entire year.

Finally, we noticed politicized trust also within participant-participant friendship pairs. In Lindsay's research preparing undergraduate arts majors to teach art in a K-12 setting, two students, Abraham and Juliet, entered the class as self-identified "best friends," which supported their engagement in the course. In class discussions they regularly referred to private conversations they had about content outside of class and supported each other in tangible ways including bringing food for the other, offering rides home after class and engaging in lively debates about their artwork. An intimacy of knowing each other across multiple contexts and systems allowed for a trust that expanded their forms of participation in the course. In turn, expressing politicized care for each other transformed the participation of their peers and fostered a learning environment conducive to growth and consequential learning. Having a best friend in the same course supported a deep connection to the curricular content, informed their teaching practices, and future careers as teaching artists.

Across these examples, politicized trust not only seemed to be necessary for the formation of friendships to emerge in these contexts, but also appeared to be consequential to the ways of being and thinking experienced by individuals. Whether it was the expansive ideas around the political in the learning sciences by Ava and Lauren, Heather and Ms. B's development of a new curriculum, or Abraham and Juliet's deepened forms of participation in class, politicized trust appeared to build a kind of intersubjectivity between friends that opened up new learning and research pathways.

Ethical vulnerability

As politicized trust developed, friends engaged in an ethical vulnerability in which intimate forms of care and collective responsibility for each other emerged. Take for example Naomi and Suraj's friendship, in which ethical vulnerability was fostered in explicit discourses of praise and celebration. In particular, the pair have coordinated writing groups focused on emotional and environmental support for nearly a year as they both worked toward finishing their degrees. This supportive space led to a tradition of loudly and joyfully celebrating accomplishments. As a result of their friendship, Naomi and Suraj found a sense of responsibility towards each other to advocate for themselves, fellow graduate students, and populations implicated in their research, offering a life vest against key academic nightmares like repeated rejection, imposter syndrome, and burnout (Jaremka et al., in press).

Lauren had similar experiences with her close collaborator Sarah during their most recent collaboration, co-developing, leading, and collecting data on a one-week design workshop on embodiment and STEM with professional dancers and math teachers. Lauren shared insecurities about her capacity to effectively lead this work and instead of positioning Lauren as unqualified, Sarah took her feelings seriously while also finding strengths in ideas she was insecure about. Reciprocally, Lauren was attuned to Sarah's positioning in her new role as a researcher, because Sarah had expressed long-held sentiments about not wanting to be taken for granted as a leader instead of a dancer in this community. Both Lauren and Sarah were able to foster a caring sensibility in which they felt supported and nurtured. Surfacing and sharing these anxieties and insecurities grounded their friendship both inside and outside of the research, as both members pushed each other to grow and encouraged each other when they doubted themselves.

Lastly, we noticed ethical vulnerability within student friendships in Ava's year-long ethnography of a U.S. history class, specifically between two friends: Bolaji and Savannah. Bolaji, an 11th grader who identified as a Black, Nigerian American male, was very outgoing but other students often dismissed his questions as off-task. Although Savannah (an 11th grader who identified as a Black woman) and Bolaji had been friends since middle school, they rarely interacted with each other in class until assigned to the same group. Bolaji felt "comfortable with her, she answers my questions," that he did not want to ask the teacher or the rest of the class. This comfort was built on their relational histories; instead of dismissing Bolaji's questions as irrelevant, Savannah ensured Bolaji was listened and responded to, always willing to set aside her own work for Bolaji. The ethical vulnerability in their friendship appeared to be consequential to Bolaji's disciplinary learning in the class and perhaps identity as a legitimate participant.

Across these examples, we see the ways vulnerability is uniquely experienced within friendships. Furthermore, this ethical vulnerability appeared to open new ways of being that shifted the kinds of activities and activity structures individuals engaged in, demonstrating the potential impact friendships based on this quality can have in learning and research trajectories.

Discussion

Exploring the role of friendship in learning across these categories helped us start to see the ways these relational constructs emerge and shape how we engage learning sciences research. We highlighted two key constructs, politicized trust and ethical vulnerability, that appear to be central to the development and impact of friendships with respect to learning and research. Although we separated these constructs in our analysis, we also noticed the ways they were intimately connected. In our examples of ethical vulnerability, politicized trust was already developed as a foundation for ethical vulnerability to emerge. Further work is needed to explore this temporal relationship between these two constructs. This initial analysis demonstrates the critical role friendships play in the learning sciences, and perhaps academia more broadly, both in the research we conduct (i.e. methodological implications for seeing the emergence and learning impact of friendships within data) and the thinking we put forward (the expansive theorizing and analysis potentially afforded through the development of friendships).

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