

Designing for Connected Arts Learning through Culturally Sustaining Practices

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Abstract: Community-based arts organizations curate and build experiences rooted in local culture through culturally sustaining practices. Through analysis of interviews with leaders at community-based arts organizations, we found that each took a different route to supporting culturally sustaining arts practices, which enacted relational elements of connected learning environments. We describe three models of culturally sustaining arts approaches (i.e., heritage and history, intergenerational, and youth culture) and suggest that each supports relational elements of connected learning.

Introduction

Connected learning is learning that transpires at the intersection of interests, supportive relationships and academic, civic, and career opportunities (Ito et al., 2020). Community-based arts organizations put connected learning into practice by building learning experiences rooted in local community cultures and culturally sustaining practices (Paris & Alim, 2017). To address key problems of practice facing community-based arts organizations, including communicating the legitimacy of arts education and issues concerning equity (Pepler et al., 2021), we argue that arts organizations can take different routes to supporting culturally sustaining arts practices that enact relational elements of connected learning environments (i.e., shared purpose, shared practices, sponsorship of youth interests, and making connections across settings) to support a framework for 21st century arts learning that includes a broader range of opportunities and outcomes of arts education. To detail the relationship between connected learning and culturally sustaining practices, we compare data from three arts organizations that prioritize culturally-inscribed arts practices for youth. Through analysis of interviews, here we show how three arts organizations take up culturally sustaining practices in different contexts with particular arts practices and organizational priorities, to arrive at cultural sustenance as a learning goal. We consider this work to be a theoretical innovation for describing the different ways in which culturally sustaining arts practices might constitute connected arts learning ecologies with practical implications for the design of arts learning experiences.

Methods

We drew on culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017) and connected learning for our theoretical frame. Taken from a larger dataset, we analyzed interviews with five leaders at three arts organizations, including: 1) The executive director at a multidisciplinary arts organization in Brooklyn, New York; 2) The founding artistic director and executive director at a performing arts organization in Boston, Massachusetts; and 3) The executive and deputy directors at a media arts organization in Salt Lake City, Utah. Organizations were chosen based on practices in alignment with connected learning principles such as making connections to opportunity (for a longer discussion, see Pepler et al., 2021). In our sampling we also aimed for diversity in geographic location and types of arts experiences emphasized (e.g., dance vs. media arts). We took a deductive approach to analysis, using the three domains of connected learning (interests, relationships, opportunities), as well as resonant connected learning themes around shared practices, shared purpose, making connections across settings, and sponsorship of youth interests. As we engaged with the data, we attended to culturally sustaining practices as an emerging theme that enacted elements of connected learning.

Findings: Culturally Sustaining Arts Toward Enactment of Connected Learning

We found that arts organizations took different routes to enacting culturally sustaining arts practices that emphasized relational elements of connected learning environments (i.e., shared purpose, shared practices, sponsorship of youth interests, and making connections across settings). Table 1 presents an overview of models that describe different ways in which organizations supported a culturally sustaining arts approach within their programming. We acknowledge that organizations could take more than one route toward integrating culturally sustaining arts, though we found that one model of culturally sustaining arts prevailed at each organization. In Table 1 we describe each of these models of culturally sustaining arts and use examples to highlight the ways in which arts organizations might leverage relationships with teaching artists to support elements of connected learning environments.

Table 1

Enacting of culturally sustaining arts across arts organizations and programs

Culturally Sustaining Arts Model	Description of Approach to Culturally Sustaining Arts	Examples of Relational Alignment with Connected Learning Design Principles
Heritage, and History Sustaining Arts	Often found in Black-serving organizations through intentional use of African languages and arts programming grounded in traditional practices, connecting Black neighborhoods where youth live with African heritage <i>Example: West African drums, conga, capoeira</i>	Role of the teaching artist is to facilitate interactions that call youth to interrogate history and culture toward a <i>shared purpose</i> in better understanding themselves, their communities, and unique histories. “We start from what it means to be a person of African descent, not in relation to whiteness, but in relation to how that impacts how I move through the world” - <i>Executive Director, Arts Org 1</i>
Inter-generational Sustaining Arts	Takes a familial, intergenerational approach, understanding how to leverage family relationships to support youth cultures, histories, and art forms <i>Example: Student and alum arts instructors; parent participation</i>	Role of the teaching artist is to bring in families as part of the co-organization of arts learning toward <i>making connections across settings</i> for learning in youths’ lives such as between home and out-of-school contexts. “There’s respect, protocol for eldership ... this idea of rites of passage ... it’s woven into the fabric of what we do and we have found it has been very beneficial for the young people, as well as their parents who learn from their engagement with us.” - <i>Executive Director, Arts Org 2</i>
Youth Culture Sustaining Arts	Takes a service perspective, working to understand how to best grow and support student voice within the local community context; centers youth culture, often through their interest-driven learning in media arts and technology <i>Example: Media arts and youth storytelling; Performances to community audiences</i>	Role of the teaching artist is to <i>sponsor youth interests</i> in the arts by celebrating and explicitly connecting them to opportunities, as well as engage in <i>shared practices</i> to support interest-driven forms of collaborative artistic production. “They’re contributing to the civic discourse in their communities and they’re talking about the stuff that’s really important to them. The artistic piece is the vehicle for that voice and digital media in particular is really critical” - <i>Executive Director, Arts Org 3</i>

Conclusion

Our findings highlighted different models for how arts organizations took up culturally sustaining practices in different contexts (i.e., heritage and history, intergenerational, and youth culture) as well as how through the role of the teaching artist, each culturally sustaining approach supported elements of connected learning. These findings show that arts organizations are actively leveraging culture in its dynamic forms as they work toward curating connected arts learning experiences. Each organization emphasized the role of arts media and traditions to not only engage students through interest-driven learning and boost connected learning environments, but also to connect them to history, family, and their developing voice. Importantly, this work reminds the field to consider the community and cultural roots of youth interests. Practical implications include how arts-based learning and programmatic design might be tailored around connected learning design principles to support culturally sustaining outcomes such as connections to history or youth culture. The theoretical implications of this work include extending how connected learning conceives of culturally sustaining practices through the arts.

References

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