

Analyzing Creative Works within a Community of Transformation

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Abstract: While organizational change in academia is difficult, change efforts that aim at diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) are particularly challenging. We formed a community of transformation that employs arts-based practices—speculative design, remixing, and futurisms—to support change agents. The current study investigates ways these arts practices can engage members in critiquing systems of oppression, strategically envisioning change mechanisms, and holding tight to DEIJ commitments. We analyzed community members' creative works and discussion in terms of intention, process, remixing, and change agency. We found evidence that remixing problematic materials supported a merging of activism and aesthetics. Our approach to coding and activities can be adapted by others who support DEIJ change initiatives.

Purpose

Despite numerous calls for change to improve diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion (DEIJ) in higher education, attempts at change often fail (Kezar, 2009). This is especially true in STEM fields (Kezar et al., 2015). Following research on organizational change highlighting the importance of social relationships and the utility of communities of transformation (CoTs) for equipping faculty to make substantial changes to their beliefs and practices (Gehrke & Kezar, 2017; Kezar et al., 2018), the GATHER project created a multiyear, cross-institutional CoT comprised of faculty change agents focused on fostering commitment to and capacity for creating systems change centered on advancing DEIJ in STEM higher education. The CoT helps members understand existing power relations in higher education and uses speculative design, remixing, and futurisms approaches paired with arts-based practices to support the development of change agency, or the capacity and commitment to envision and enact DEIJ systems change (Svihla et al., 2023). This study presents a framework for analyzing learning and change agency. We illustrate this framework using artifacts from arts-based learning activities, specifically a remixing and futurism activity within the CoT.

The purpose of this study was to explore ways arts-based practices might play a role in supporting members to form critical DEIJ change intentions and engage their change agency. Given that prior work incorporating visual research methods (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011) in the learning sciences is limited, one aim of this study was to explore the usefulness of such methods in understanding participants' artwork as expressions of change agency. Specifically, we selected a focal remixing and futurism activity for analysis, guided by an overarching research question: How do community members represent their roles and their DEIJ change work in creative works and reflections?

Theoretical framework

Broadly, we take a critical theory approach to both our work with the CoT and our study of it, meaning we explicitly contend with power dynamics (Cabrera et al., 2024; Foucault, 1979). We detail how this stance integrates with a CoT and with arts-based practices as a mechanism for fostering faculty change agency.

The GATHER CoT aims to foster participants' change agency, or agency aimed at shifting structures, norms, and practices (Svihla et al., 2023) towards DEIJ goals and liberatory practices. In higher education settings, understanding how power operates helps scholars and change agents better comprehend how power can be harnessed not only for domination, but also to promote racial liberation within higher education institutions (Cabrera, 2022). Cabrera et al. (2024) outline five dimensions of a Critical Race Theory of Power (CRToP), which include ways that systemically marginalized people are acted upon through both action and non-action as well as coercion through White hegemonic norms, and ways that activism and knowledge production can foster liberation. Given that the GATHER CoT includes many white members and people in powerful positions within higher

education, CRTOP highlights the potential harm of non-action and continuation of the status quo and helps shift from a focus on reducing racial harm to racial liberation (Cabrera et al., 2024).

We drew explicitly on critical theories, including an intersectional conception of power (Collins & Bilge, 2020) in the design of the GATHER CoT and its activities (Svihla et al., 2023). For example, when engaging in remixing activities, we ask participants to consider who is represented in the source materials and who is left out, and to what extent the source materials may perpetuate or disrupt dominant ideologies.

Arts-based practices facilitate participants' imaginations (Rhoades, 2021), allowing them to "break with what is supposedly fixed and finished" and "form notions of what should be and what is not yet" (Greene, 2000, p. 19). One such practice, remixing, involves making changes to existing narratives/representations (Dando, 2020), which studies have connected to agency (Dando, 2020; Herro & Quigley, 2016). Another such practice, futurisms, are visionary narratives that replace oppression with hope, thereby supporting people to imagine their role in shaping the future (Holbert et al., 2020; Winchester III, 2018).

Arts-based practices can foster learning about DEIJ, in turn addressing social issues in creative and inclusive ways (Foster, 2015). By integrating emotional and embodied experiences, arts-based education has the potential to propel new ways of thinking, move participants into action, and enact social change by challenging entrenched power structures and amplifying marginalized voices (Foster, 2015; Greene, 2000; Mullooly, 2022). Critical arts-based approaches, which combine arts-based pedagogies with critical frameworks such as intersectionality, can support student success and learning about DEIJ issues (Mullooly, 2022; Rhoades, 2021).

Methodology

The GATHER CoT has 85 members from 57 institutions of higher education and 8 organizations. We collected data at all CoT events, including regular virtual events and a two-day hybrid retreat for core members in April 2024. Data include audio and video records of events and workshops (transcribed verbatim) and artifacts including artworks and reflective writing. These are supplemented by our own notes and recordings of team meetings in which we discussed our observations and the impacts of our designs.

Our analysis focuses on a graphic novel activity completed on the second day of the hybrid retreat. This activity used arts-based practices with a focus on remixing and futurity. Participants created a short graphic novel to depict their role as a change agent. There are approaches to analyzing arts-based practices, though often the focus is on analyzing the artist's statement and not on analyzing the art itself. We drew upon approaches detailed in visual research methods (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011). To analyze five artifacts themselves alongside the discussion, we first created a deductive coding scheme (Saldaña, 2015) that drew from Dewhurst's (2017) approach to analyzing critical, justice-centered arts, including examining the artist's intentions and their process in terms of critical questioning and translating. Through critical questioning "possibilities for alternative explanations open up; spaces for complexity or multi-dimensionality unfold" (p. 84). Translating refers to the process of representing thoughts, feelings, and knowledge into material form. The artist's aesthetic decisions shape the artwork's "capacity to impact conditions of inequality or injustice" (p. 85). We added attention to the remixing practices that were a focus of the activity, as well as change agency (Svihla et al., 2023), which addressed how participants represented themselves and their role in DEIJ-centered change (Table 1).

Table 1
Coding Framework

Lenses	Codes
Intention: Activity	Passive - Raise awareness of DEIJ issue
	Active - Change attitude about DEIJ issue
Intention: Rootedness	Rooted in experience
	Not rooted
Process - Critical questioning	Complex - Many dimensions, including alternatives
	Simple - Few dimensions, single explanations
Process - Translating	Activism lacks aesthetics
	Merging of activism and aesthetics
	Aesthetics overpower the message
Critical Remixing	Start with problematic material
	Modify the materials
Change Agency	Represent self as change agent

We performed two rounds of coding for each artifact (Saldaña, 2015), first focusing exclusively on the artifact, and second, listening to the discussion of the artifact, including the artist's statement. We discussed each

graphic novel separately as well as comparatively. We wrote memos during and after (Merriam, 2014). When disagreements about coding arose, we discussed them until we came to consensus (Saldaña, 2015).

Findings and discussion

The graphic novels employed remixing techniques using a variety of source materials, both paper-based and technological. Members took different approaches, ranging from more abstract representations to more narrative ones. We present analyses of two of these graphic novels.

Iris (all names are pseudonyms) discussed being inspired by Work Projects Administration (WPA) posters (Figure 1). While several participants remarked that her graphic novel was visually striking, we found it hard to interpret before rewatching video from the retreat, suggesting that the *aesthetics overpower the message*. Iris did not substantially modify the original source materials, contributing to the difficulty of interpretation and the relative *simplicity* of her representation. Though we originally thought her intention was passive, after hearing the artist's statement, her intention was *active*. Iris retained the frame of the WPA advertisements she took the materials from; her intention was to change behavior. When she talked about the artifact, it became clear that this was *rooted* in her experiences with community college and technical education. She represented herself as recruiter in this graphic novel, suggesting that her role as a change agent involves persuading other people to engage in individual mindset and behavioral change.

Figure 1

Iris's Graphic Novel with Embedded Analysis



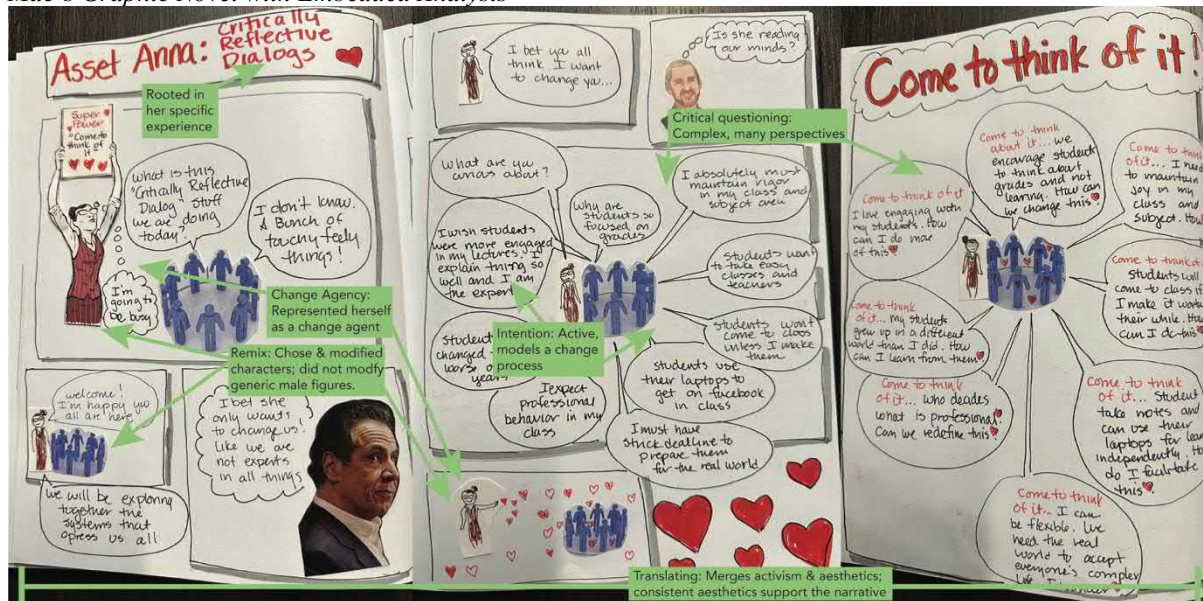
Mae's intention with this graphic novel (Figure 2) was *active* (rather than passive). In her artist's statement, Mae explained that Asset Anna was a persona who embodied a change agent superpower "of making people say 'come to think of it'" and shift from deficit thinking to asset-based thinking about students. Through the multi-paneled artwork, she modeled how to approach a change process that helps faculty reconsider existing ideas about students. The specificity of the narrative suggests that this is *rooted in her experience*. Her story is *complex*, representing multiple perspectives (the protagonist and faculty with differing perspectives). It *merges activism and aesthetics*—the comic layout balances the narrative with a clear and consistent protagonist and a consistent group of faculty. The text supports viewers' interpretation.

Mae represented her change agent persona as an empathic listener able to change hearts and minds through a superpower represented by hearts. Mae's stated, "I really wish I could do it," referring to this superpower. Though she represented an ability she wishes she had, other CoT members suggested she already possessed it. Mae expressed gratitude for this community support and encouragement.

Through these graphic novels, participants reflected on past experiences and current professional challenges to consider their own role as change agents, representing change agency skills they possessed and/or those they aspired to possess. Some reflected on moments earlier in their lives and career development, and some focused on current professional challenges, such as Mae and Iris.

Figure 2

Mae's Graphic Novel with Embedded Analysis



Conclusion

Through remixing and futurism practices, the graphic novel activity supported participants to imagine existing or desired abilities and recognize how they could be effective change agents. They created narratives rooted in their own experiences and institutional contexts and roles. Mae represented herself as a capable change agent—specifically someone who can change hearts and minds through empathetic listening. Iris depicted herself and others (potentially members of her change team) using strong aesthetics and direct language to persuade individuals to change their mindsets and behaviors. Our analysis suggests that the materials matter—when starting from less problematic, more appealing materials, participants may allow the aesthetics to overpower the narrative. Constraining source materials may help this issue. Additionally, the variability in how artists expressed change agency suggests it may be helpful to have a pre-work session where participants are scaffolded to consider their change agency “superpower,” their role in DEIJ-focused change, their context, and a specific scenario or sequence.

Few resources exist to guide speculative equity-focused arts-based practices and research (Garcia & Mirra, 2023; Mullooly, 2022). We found few papers that offered clear guidance about these kinds of activities and how to analyze them. In this paper, we offer a coding scheme that extends Dewhurst’s (2017) elements of intention and process, bringing attention to remixing practices and change agency to support analysis of both artworks and discussion surrounding them. This work adds new knowledge about the learning, agency, and experiences of participants, as well as facilitating arts-based education. Both our activity and our approach to analysis can be adapted by others, offering new insights into visual research methods (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011) that can be used in the learning sciences. By creating a space of critical expression for educators and their experiences with equity-focused work, we offer a model of being in community with each other as we work to make higher education more just and humane for all.

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