

BEYOND LITERACY AND VOICE IN YOUTH MEDIA PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT. When analyzing young people's media projects, it is easy to get excited about "youth voice" as a site of free expression and social critique. Tempting as this is, media scholars, as well as young producers and adult mentors, note the varied, often contradictory, voices and interests at play within youth videos, photography exhibitions, and other media experiments. Here, I focus on a specific manifestation of multivocality in youth media discourse. That is, heavy use of "reported speech," a linguistic term to describe moments of interaction in which speakers quote, paraphrase, or otherwise invoke other people's words. Young media producers use reported speech in striking ways to negotiate authority over their own projects, animating an interactive process I call "crowded talk," with implications for multiliteracy theory and practice.

AU-DELÀ DE LA LITTÉRATIE ET DE LA VOIX DANS LA PRODUCTION MÉDIA DES JEUNES

RÉSUMÉ. Lorsque nous analysons les projets médiatiques des jeunes, il est facile de s'enthousiasmer à propos de la « voix des jeunes » comme foyer de liberté d'expression et de critique sociale. Même si cet enthousiasme est invitant, les chercheurs en média, ainsi que les jeunes producteurs et les mentors adultes, soulignent la diversité, et souvent la contradiction, des voix et des intérêts qui entrent en jeu dans les vidéos, les expositions de photos et les autres expériences médiatiques des jeunes. Ici, je mets l'accent sur une manifestation précise de la multiplicité des voix dans le discours des médias des jeunes. C'est-à-dire, l'utilisation excessive d'un « discours rapporté », un terme de linguistique qui décrit les moments d'interaction où les orateurs citent, paraphrasent ou rappellent d'une autre façon les mots d'autres personnes. Les jeunes producteurs de médias utilisent le discours rapporté de façon saisissante afin de revendiquer une autorité autour de leurs propres projets, animant un processus interactif que j'appelle *crowded talk*, (conversation chargée) qui a des répercussions sur la théorie et la pratique de la multilittératie.

Literacy is an omnipresent term in youth media research. The arguments circulating around this term and its various permutations (e.g., multiliteracies, popular literacy, critical literacy, media literacy) constitute a full-blown

discourse through which scholars frame how and what young people learn by making original media (Buckingham, 2003). A second discourse that dominates these discussions among scholars and practitioners is the issue of *voice*. Youth media projects very often describe what they do as a process of “giving voice” to young people, or helping them “find their voice,” or highlighting “silenced voices” by providing teenagers with the skills and access needed to express their stories (Fleetwood, 2005).

As both a media scholar and producer – someone who writes about these issues and works daily with youth to create stories for national radio broadcast – I have relied heavily on notions of literacy and voice in my research, as well as in my everyday discussions with colleagues and young people about the role of youth media production in education and social justice work. In this paper, I want to historicize, contextualize, and critique these linked discourses of literacy and voice within the research literature, and then apply those insights to my own language data, gathered over the past decade from non-school youth media arts programs across the United States. I have accumulated this corpus through ethnographic field work and interviews in over 20 programs ranging from zine-writing and poetry projects to video and radio collaboratives involving primarily low income and racialized youth (Chavez & Soep, 2005; Heath, 2001; Heath & Soep, 1998; Soep, 2002, 2003, 2005a & b, 2006).

This article draws on language data from a single after-school youth media program in a U.S. city, and the analysis centres on a specific linguistic feature, reported speech. Through reported speech, a speaker’s utterances are “filled to overflowing” with other people’s words, through quotes, indirect references and paraphrases, accents, and allusions (Bakhtin, 1981; Baynam, 1996; Besnier, 1993; Buttny, 1997; Garber, 2001; Goodwin, 1990, 1998; Hill & Irvine, 1993; Hull & Katz, forthcoming; Inoue, 2006; MacLean, 1994; Myers, 1999; Oshima, 2005; Reyes, 2005; Schiffrin, 1993, 1996; Shuman, 1986, 1993; Tannen, 1989, 1995; Volosinov, 1978). Heavy use of reported speech creates talk that is distinctly “crowded,” even if only two people are physically present in conversation. For example, a seventeen year old filmmaker articulates the hypothetical response of an audience member while arguing for the inclusion of a specific stretch of dialogue in her script; a teen poet recording a piece for radio broadcast re-voices comments from an editor in making a case for not changing something he considers key to his core message.

My research suggests that reported speech appears with particular frequency and consequence at moments when young people are called upon to evaluate their own creative work. This use of reported speech seems connected to the potential, noted in linguistic studies, for evaluation to set off highly “participatory” moments of interaction, through which speakers are often called upon to agree or disagree with an uttered assessment, displace respon-

sibility for a judgment they have expressed, or provide evidence for their claims (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992; Hill & Irvine, 1993; Linde, 1997; Soep, 2006). Recent studies of youth media practices, and collaborative learning environments more broadly, point to the importance of ongoing self- and peer-evaluation, as a way to link technical skills with broader goals ranging from personal expression and aesthetic innovation to collective organizing and “non-violent political action” (Cohen et al, 2002; Fisher, 2003; Goldfarb, 2002; Kafai, 1996; Stewart, 2002; Tannock, 1998). Yet we know relatively little about the actual language young people use to carry out these ongoing evaluations of their own projects. The strikingly crowded character of this language, as explored here, unsettles conceptions of “authentic youth voice” (see also Fleetwood, 2005), to the extent that individual young people, in these instances, in fact strategically leverage, dramatize, and experiment with varied real and imagined voices, even in a single utterance.

The article begins with a brief critical review of the discourses of literacy and voice in youth media research, and then goes on to trace traditions for studying reported speech in linguistics and education. Highlighting a series of representative ethnographic episodes drawn from an after-school movie-making program called Cutaway, the analysis conceptualizes the significance of crowded talk, marked by reported speech, with respect to learning theory and practice, concluding with new ways to define the “situation” in situated learning, and new ways to theorize the “multi,” and the “literacy,” in multiliteracy.

Cults of literacy and voice

Scholars like Shirley Brice Heath (1983) and Brian Street (1998) revolutionized the study of reading and writing by highlighting the social dimensions of literacy events, which had previously been conceived of as internal exercises of the isolated mind in relation to printed words on a page. A second wave of fresh thinking about literacy has been ushered in by the arrival of digital technologies, with their characteristic “intertextualities,” as well as the emergence of new social practices surrounding electronic media, such as instant messaging, video gaming, music downloading, and digital photography captured and swapped through cellular phones (e.g., Gee, 2004; Ito, 2005a & b; Parker, forthcoming).

Literacy research for more than a decade has built on the fundamental assumption that the alphabetic text is but one of several interconnected sign-systems young people must be able to analyze, evaluate, and produce if they are to function fully in the modern world (Buckingham, 2003). Changes in accepted definitions of literacy can be attributed to a range of factors, including new forms of interaction and increased speed of information flow, multiplying communication channels and technologies, proliferation and globalization of popular cultures, new migration patterns, shifting journalistic

practices, and intensified political debates surrounding media and society (Tyner, 1998; see also Appadurai, 1996). The notion of multi-media literacy suggests “an ability to work across text, image, sound, and moving image with equal fluency” (Sefton-Green, 2000). While some scholars object to the implication built into this term that each form of literacy, be it visual, alphabetic, or auditory, for example, operates independently and ahistorically, researchers have undeniably found the concept useful as a way to frame the relationship between media production and learning.

This literature often links the idea of “multiliteracy” with social empowerment and agency, as in Steve Goodman’s analysis of a youth video project, through which New York City teens fluent in multiple literacies “frame their own place in society,” exercising the “broad knowledge students bring to the languages of media, technology and culture beyond print” (2003, p. 31). Key for multiliteracy, then, is students’ capacity not only to use a range of tools and technologies, but also to form analyses of power and representation in the broader society and especially within contexts for media production (Hull, 2003). This larger social analysis is not an automatic byproduct of a given youth media project; in fact, several studies point to the ways in which young people can reproduce gendered and racialized stereotypes, and mimic the most problematic or at least uninspired formulas within mainstream commercial media, in their own graphics, videos, or websites created through media education classes and programs (Fleetwood, 2005; Sefton-Green & Sinker, 2000; Soep, 2005a; Tyner, 1998). Likewise, Tannock (2004) cautions that researchers themselves sometimes fall into ideological and political traps in their own eagerness to “recover” or “redeem” that which is literate in youth culture: “[T]he academic documentation of literacy among social groups and individuals for whom such literacy has previously been left unrecognized is not in and of itself an automatically enabling or progressive move, but can in fact be extremely disempowering for the subjects of our research” (p. 164). Celebrating the sophisticated literacy demands of an after-school retail or food service job, Tannock argues, can draw attention away from the ways in which labour structures in the U.S. take advantage of young workers. Applying this argument to the youth media field, documenting the impressive multiliteracy benefits of creating a documentary, or launching a blog, may sometimes keep researchers from asking tough questions about the actual quality and impact of young people’s learning experiences, or the extent to which the benefits carry over into measurable social and educational capital outside a short-term program.

If literacy invokes the legitimacy of sanctioned learning outcomes attached to reading and writing, the second major logic behind much of the literature on youth media production, that centered on voice, leverages the power of self-expression. In their mapping of the youth media field, Campbell et al (2001) highlight “youth voice” as one of the primary goals programs claim,

alongside professional outcomes, youth development, media literacy, and academic achievement. Certainly the proliferation of media education programs across the U.S. in the 1960s reflected a growing interest at that time in the expressive and political potentials embedded within young people's creative cultures (Tavin, 2005). Several research reviews and literacy studies (e.g., Buckingham, 2005; Tyner, 1998) point to the overwhelming focus in much of that literature on emotion and identity benefits associated with the opportunity for young people to "tell their own stories" and "find their own voices."

Like the focus on literacy, however, this celebration of voice is hardly trouble-free. "These notions of voice tend to be romanticized by artists," says Trend (1997, p. 256), who suggests that media producers working with disenfranchised youth often hold the modernist assumption that all self-expression is always emancipatory. Ellsworth (1992) elaborates this point in her critique of educators' anxieties about challenging students' accounts of their own lived experiences for fear of being seen as abusers of authority (see also Lensmire, 1998; Middendorf, 1992). Writing from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, Orner (1992), too, says celebrating student voice can backfire, by positing a fully egalitarian environment where none exists, thereby obscuring rather than unsettling uneven distributions of power. Video, in particular, holds apparent appeal as a resource for "dispossessed" communities, given its relative accessibility and early use in art scenes heavily engaged with cultural politics (Marchessault, 1995). In her study of youth video programs, Fleetwood (2005) cautions that media projects have a tendency to pursue the fantasy of "authentic" youth experience, which itself often embodies a sensationalized portrayal of racialized urban youth. Fleetwood shows that questions about the reification of inequalities within youth media products and processes, as well as the obstacles that often block young people from participating in key aspects of production beyond providing "raw" first-person testimonies, tend to fall away under these conditions.

Multiple voices as crowded talk at Cutaway

It is surprising, given the various uses and abuses of voice discourse in youth media practices and research, that scholars in this field have paid relatively little attention to voice in its literal sense, as in the actual language young people use as they jointly produce and learn in non-school settings (for exceptions, see Heath, 2001; Tannock, 1998, 1999; Varenne & McDermott, 1999). Where education researchers interested in the relationship between youth culture and learning have taken up an interest in voice in this more literal sense, they typically analyze, and implicitly argue for, dialogic learning environments, meaning those in which multiple young people collaborate on hands-on projects (see Fisher, 1996; McCreeedy, 1998; Mortimer, 1998 for studies of youth voices inside school classrooms). This focus on collaborative

learning potentials within creative projects has been extremely useful, and a powerful antidote to classroom studies that continue to privilege individual “zero sum” student performance and achievement (Noguera, 2001; Varenne & McDermott, 1999). That said, there can be a tendency within studies of dialogism on the group level to overlook the extent to which such settings can promote a “babble” of voices from individuals paying little attention to what others have to say (Lensmire, 1997, p. 389). What is also lost, with this emphasis on dialogism across speakers, is the extent to which, through reported speech, individual young people weave varied voices into their own utterances, particularly as they prepare and assess their own creative projects.

Two of the most influential scholars of reported speech are Mikhail Bakhtin (1981 [1934]) and V. N. Volosinov (1978 [1930]). Focusing on literary texts and everyday discourse, the two identified various forms reported speech can take, and analyzed the larger significance of these forms, in terms of the social worlds they help produce through language. Reported speech includes direct quotations, sometimes attributed and sometimes not, as well as paraphrases, and citations of speech that an actual person has said, as well as occasions when an interlocutor conjures speech that is fully imaginary – presented *as if* it had been said before, or might be said, by someone else (Tannen, 1983). A person might report someone else’s speech as a way to align with a voice of authority, or to mock another speaker, or to dramatize a scene, or to convey a sense of empirical reliability, to name just a handful of pragmatic implications of reported speech. Perhaps most interestingly, Bakhtin identified a form of reported speech called “double-voiced discourse,” in which another person’s words enter a speaker’s utterance in a concealed form. A literary example might appear in a passage where an author uses highly pretentious, florid language to introduce a character who fits that profile, inflecting the narrator’s own voice with the personality of the individual described. More relevant to the present discussion, of course, are instances of double-voiced discourse based in youth media production – for example, at Cutaway, the youth movie-making project I will focus on here.

First, some context about this particular site for youth media production. Founded in 1995, Cutaway is located in a major U.S. west coast city, involving primarily working and middle class youth of colour and led by a white artist from a working class family.¹ In the specific Cutaway project highlighted here, eight young artists, ranging in age from 14-18, spent one summer and fall producing a series of original movies, acting and serving as crew members on one another’s productions. Their participation was voluntary and tuition-free. The individual videos were eventually projected simultaneously in a gallery installation. While learning the basic technical skills of video production, the young people spent several weeks brainstorming ideas for their individual movies, as well as narrative and visual themes that would

resonate across all the work, lending coherence to the overall installation. Lila, the adult artist in charge, launched the project with a loose suggestion that perhaps the group should focus on their neighbourhoods, but by the time the young people had developed scripts and begun shooting, they had diverged considerably from that initial point of departure. There was one mockumentary about flirtation rituals between boys and girls, an experimental documentary on public art, and an earnest, soap opera-like love story about romance across race and class, to name a few examples. Every phase of the process that led up to these completed movies was punctuated by episodes of peer critique, where the young people reviewed and assessed one another's works, discussing and debating strengths, weaknesses, and possibilities for change (Soep, 2006).²

One small moment of reported speech as "double-voiced discourse" took place during an especially heated video shoot, when one of the teen actors grew frustrated with his director, also a high school student, and threatened to storm off the set. He did so by adopting a high-pitched, girlish tone, and declaring, "I quit!," then shifting to his own natural, deeper register to indicate that he was just kidding, only to revert immediately to a hyperbolic feminized voice to demand, "Where's my agent?" and making as if he were about to bail from the shoot.

This small moment can easily be dismissed as trivial in the context of an hours-long video shoot embedded within a project cycle lasting months. But scholars of reported speech point to the importance of considering moment-to-moment interactions precisely at this fine-grained level.³ This young actor accomplished a great deal in his tiny linguistic gesture. Without directly attacking his peer-director's skills, the actor communicated his frustration about how the shoot was progressing by conjuring the exaggerated, gendered voice. Without relinquishing his own identity – note his deep-voiced delivery while insisting that he was only kidding – he took up another person's imaginary voice to get his point across. That other person was highly gendered, a familiar stereotype. He invoked this character in such a way that left little room for the group to consider why a moody, petulant participant in this interaction would "naturally" play best as a gender other than his own.

What "youth voice" is being expressed in this scene? An "at risk" Cambodian-American teenager who attends an under-resourced urban public school? That is one way to describe this speaker, which would be typical of how young people in his situation are often characterized in education and youth research. Or is he an actor engaged in a professional shoot, cast in a movie destined for a museum premier? An artist raising questions about his director's abilities? A histrionic actress with an agent and the power to disrupt a shoot by showing attitude? A young man who makes use of gendered stereotypes that are available in the larger culture? A person injecting

levity, if passive-aggressively, in an increasingly tense scene? The answer, it seems, is all and none of the above, or perhaps some combination of these varied voices, whose implications are revealed in part through the effects of this kind of moment on the continued production carried out by this young man and his collaborators on this shoot.

The broader conceptual point comes back to the sociologist Erving Goffman's observation that all individuals speak, "explicitly or implicitly, in the name of 'we,' not 'I'" (1983, p. 145). Striking in my language data throughout various phases of youth media production, and indeed across sites, are the complex ways that young people speak in the name of we, and not necessarily by literally repeating what someone else has said. There were instances of implied attribution: suggesting what a speaker says is completely consistent with a collaborator's ideas, when this may or may not be the case. There were instances of joint articulation: finishing someone else's sentences, so the speaker essentially takes over as "author" of someone else's words. There were instances of parody: mimicking the characteristic speech of an individual or group, in such a way that the speaker is acting as both him/herself and someone else at the same time (MacLean, 1994). These various forms of reported speech tie back to the matter of literacy as it relates to youth media production. Literacy in this sense entails a capacity to participate in a certain kind of crowded conversation – an ability to shift between and among varied voices. These voices do more than introduce a specific outside "presence" into an episode of learning. By crowding the talk with varied voices, young people often implicitly raise issues of authority and entitlement (Shuman, 1993), and heighten the "drama" of a particular moment of interaction (Tannen, 1989) while accomplishing serious, if "noisy," work (Tannock, 1998).

Dramatized confrontation

In her study of narratives embedded within everyday conversation, the linguist Deborah Tannen (1989) noticed the dramatic function of what she calls "constructed dialogue," marked by moments of reported speech. She has found that introducing other people's voices into one's own speech increases engagement and interest among speakers and listeners. In my own data, a specific form of dramatization – that is, dramatized confrontation – appeared with special regularity and consequence within the language of youth media production. For example, JR, a Cutaway movie-maker, objected to the depiction of a character in the script presented by his peer, a high school student named Claire. Claire described one main character in her movie as a "yuppy" and the other as "from the ghetto."

Excerpt 1: Oh, he's from the ghetto

1. JR: Are you planning to use that in the movie, as saying, 'Oh, he's from the ghetto...'? Because I don't know if you're planning to offend people.

2. Claire: Yeah, people will get offended.
3. JR: People will get offended, cause I myself, cause like, sometimes I dress a certain way, and people say, "Oh, you're – you must be from the ghetto," and like, some other stereotype like that, but I say –
4. Ben: Or "You act ghetto," something like that.
5. JR: "I'm low inc – I may have a low income, you know what I'm saying, I'm not rich, but I'm not – " you know what I'm saying?
6. Claire: Mm hm. Yeah, actually, I didn't know what to call – I didn't want to say, "too bad he's poor." I wanted a better term than that, so I used ghetto, but I don't know. Maybe you guys can like help me think of a better term.

Instances of reported speech run through this excerpt. JR begins in line 1 by paraphrasing Claire's language and then asking about her intent. In line 3, after repeating her reply verbatim, JR goes on to begin conjuring a scene within which others have portrayed him in much the same way Claire portrays her character. Line 5 is particularly interesting, in light of Bakhtin's idea of "double-voiced discourse" as moments in which another person's words enter one's own speech in concealed or ambiguous ways. It's impossible to know, really, whether JR in this line is speaking "as himself" in the present moment, or as the character he turns himself into within this scene of imagined confrontation and offense. Line 6 contains its own example of reported speech, where Claire quotes something she wanted *not* to say, as a way to explain how she came upon this notion of invoking a "ghetto" character in the first place. By dramatizing this moment of confrontation and crowding his speech with multiple voices, JR shifted the frame of this interaction from a relatively dry discussion of script structure to one enlivened and intensified by a scene raising the specter of offense.

This dramatized use of reported actual and imagined speech also shifts the frame of literacy as it is often applied to learning experiences within youth media production. Certainly, producing a movie through a program like Cutaway requires various forms of media literacy, including production skills, narrative and aesthetic concepts, social negotiation and an understanding of issues of representation and power. On a meta level, these forms of literacy seem to depend on a capacity to enter into crowded talk, through which young people invoke and leverage varied real and imagined voices. In so doing, they are able to marshal the specific mix of perspectives they think will help them make a desired point. More research is needed to understand how reported speech functions across various art forms, design and compositional processes, and other cognitive and creative pursuits, as well as specific uses of reported speech among youth (Goodwin, 1990; Hoyle & Adger, 1998). It seems likely, however, that this discourse feature might surface especially within undertakings like video production, which require constant collaboration and hence communication of intent, perception, and judgment.

The matter of mixing real and imagined voices arose with particular salience at the very end of this Cutaway project, when the young people gathered in the museum gallery just hours before a preview screening of the Cutaway installation, two weeks before the museum would officially open its doors. The preview opening was, in the young people's views, a disaster. There were several technical problems with the installation. The young people had heard that construction on the museum building itself had only been completed two days prior to the preview. Huge spaces were still unpainted. The movie projections in the Cutaway exhibit appeared in the wrong order. The wall text they had been promised was nowhere in sight. The light that streamed into the gallery made it nearly impossible to see several of the movies at all. The young people were not pleased.

Excerpt 2: Don't tell us that

1. JR: But I'm saying, how do **you** feel loved when **you** finish **your** stuff two days before, **you** know what I'm saying.
2. Paula: We're not loved.
3. JR: I feel no love at all here, it's like, whatever. **You** guys do what you gotta do. I was ready to start painting or something there. I was gonna hold the projection on my head so everyone saw. Dang, dude...
4. Paula: It's like, **you** can tell us that we should be happy and da da da...
5. JR: Yeah, don't tell us that. There's more potential here...
6. Paula: It's like, we did our job, why can't they? It's not like we were hella slacking and pulled it off in a day or something. A lot of us stayed up until really late, past our bed time. I mean, look at Kristine and Alexa (two other Cutaway producers), they were like, hella into it. And they didn't tell us – I mean, I have sympathy and everything for them saying, "Oh yeah, for the past two weeks or month we've been like, 24 hours and stuff," "Yeah, that's really sweet and all that and props to **you** guys," but it's not like we didn't do that either... It's so sloppy.
7. JR: Imagine this visual. Two days before Saturday, okay? The dome is not painted, the cylinder is not painted at all. **You** get two painters, starting to paint, and they take a break to smoke, and it's a fifteen to twenty minute break. I'm like, "Hold on, okay," and they only started like ten minutes ago, and they start smoking. I'm like, "Okay, what **you** all doing? **You** want me to start painting?" It's like, I don't know –

This excerpt is essentially an exercise in dramatized confrontation, with JR and Paula expressing their frustration with the installation by pitting themselves against those they hold responsible for its disappointing state. They enact several scenes of imagined verbal conflict with absent adversaries. I have highlighted the various references to "you" throughout this transcript to mark the shifting perspectives and roles JR and Paula adopt as they assess the state of their work. Line 1 alone includes four different real and imaginary versions of you: the first invokes a generic person in the kind of situation within which the Cutaway artists find themselves; the second and third invoke the museum workers whose "stuff," according to JR and Paula,

wasn't completed on time; and the fourth addresses Paula directly – the only “real” other participant in this conversation.

These two young people continue throughout the transcript to position themselves in confrontational scenes and dialogues – with painters, the museum staff who had indicated they should be pleased, and other young people in their group. Notably, none of these heated scenes ever actually takes place in real life.

In Excerpt 2, the young people launch a spontaneous conversation about their installation; shortly afterwards, Lila, the Cutaway director, gathers them to review the exhibit more systematically, before they sit down with the museum director. She draws attention to technical matters such as lighting and audio, aesthetic concerns related to composition of the environment, and support materials such as wall text and the design of a brochure. Among other issues, the blinds that were supposed to block out light from the projections arise as a severe problem, both because they failed to serve that function, and because the group thought they looked like “shower curtains” (this characterization set off much embittered laughter). After their discussion with Lila, the young people meet with the museum director, Derreck, to express their concerns. This conversation strikes a very different tone than the imagined confrontation played out previously in Excerpt 2. Embedded within that encounter comes the following exchange:

Excerpt 3: I understand that

1. Lila: The windows right here need to be dealt with somehow.
2. JR: And there are pieces, especially with the light coming from here, like, (to Derreck) you said it was gonna get better, but when I was sitting there, every hour after hour, it wasn't. I was just standing there, watching people go through. It's just faded. The only good pieces are the ones [located right here in this area] –
3. Paula: that are like – yeah, that don't have any –
4. JR: They don't have no light.
5. Derreck: So it's the windows right here?
6. JR: Yeah, that's the leakage.
7. Derreck: Okay, great.
8. JR: And, um, some of the leakage is coming from the little cracks in the curtains, or the shower curtains, right? (laughter from the group).
9. Derreck: We had special drapes made for those.
10. JR: Special drapes. Oh, okay.
11. Derreck: That's a hard one. I don't know. Did you notice, when people stepped in, was there a huge amount of light [splashed]?
12. JR: Huge.
13. Derreck: Yeah, that's a hard one.

14. JR: That is hard. I understand that.
15. Derreck: Yeah, it's gonna be – to be able to lock that out.
16. JR: Oh, that's understandable.

Both Excerpt 2 and Excerpt 3 showcase the linguistic construction of confrontation. But in Excerpt 2, Paula and JR take on various imaginary adversaries, while in Excerpt 3, they come face-to-face with someone real, an adversary of sorts, whose speech they can no longer script for themselves. The first interaction in this sequence is aggressive and fearless, the second conciliatory and understanding. In the second interaction, when JR slips in a dig about the museum's use of shower curtains (line 8), the confrontation does not stop there, or unfold with Paula and JR continuing to speak for both sides of the conversation; Derreck speaks up himself. Sounding annoyed, he explains, "We had special drapes made for those." From there JR shifts from confrontation to "understanding" (lines 14 and 16), from setting himself up in opposition to aligning himself as attentive and accommodating.

When authoritative others show up only by way of reported speech, the young people here present themselves as powerful, tough-talking, speaking with influence. When the "real" authority figure arrives on the scene, the young people continue to use reported speech – for example, in line 2, when JR tells Derreck, "you said it was gonna get better..." But the context has shifted, from imagined confrontation to direct conversation. The shift is all the more significant, of course, because the new arrival occupies a clear power position with respect to the matter at hand.

Literacy scholars, particularly those interested in multiliteracies as they form through media production, consider an analysis of power to be central to young people's capacity both to make and interpret original media. It is not enough for many of these scholars that young people acquire the technical and aesthetic skills required to create within a given medium; there is often an expectation that they concurrently develop habits of considering implicit messages, assumptions, and biases within their own and others' products, and to understand the social structures and tensions behind systems of media production and consumption. If we are serious about this dimension of multiliteracy, it is critical that we complicate the conception of voice underlying much of the scholarship and practical discourse within the youth media field – a discourse within which I fully implicate myself, in both my writing and my everyday work as a media producer with youth. When we notice the varied voices young people use as they create work, especially at moments calling for judgment or evaluation, we can no longer limit ourselves to a focus on the redeeming value of youth media as a way to honor young people's "true" voices (Fleetwood 2005). This approach overlooks the complex, "double-voiced" discourses young people actually use as they produce original media together.

Key, then, to educational experiences designed to promote multiliterate media production are intentional occasions in which young people and adults together consider, prepare for, and rehearse the different kinds of conversations they are likely to enter into in the various phases of their work, from initial inception to public display, as we have seen here in the case of Cutaway. This form of discursive preparation would touch on content – what specific feedback needs to be expressed – as well as communicative strategy – how best to convey the message within face-to-face interaction. The work of negotiating with the director of an exhibit space, of leveraging the power young people possess to influence the treatment of their own work, is as much a dimension of multiliteracy as are all the concrete skills the young people developed in order to script, shoot, and edit their movies. And just as we do not expect young people somehow to know automatically how to operate a camera or write a script, neither should we expect that they will shine in every demanding communicative scenario without specific practice and reflection.

Concluding thoughts

Researchers interested in multiliteracy focus on what it takes, and why it is important, for young people to work across varied texts with equal fluency (Sefton-Green, 2000). And yet there is one often overlooked text that deserves more fine-grained research attention – that is, the actual moment-to-moment discourse young people use to produce original media. As evident in this analysis, this “living” text contains its own multivocal qualities.

In participating in the kinds of conversations I have spotlighted here, young people are continually producing and shifting situations for their own learning, using language, and specifically crowded speech, to do so. Education scholars have made much of the idea of the situation in theories of learning as participation, which frame learning not as a process of internalizing and transferring information, but as a way of engaging in an actual community of practice. Knowledgeability, then, is situated rather than detached and decontextualized (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The anthropologist Anna Tsing (2002) takes interest in cultural situations governed by contradictory logics and agendas, marked by messy encounters with contested meanings. The contested character of these situations comes at least in part through the crowds they contain, when the discourse of production is shot through with real and imagined voices. These situations within media production are ones through which young people have much to learn. Even though young people will never, nor will any of us, fully control the crowd.

NOTES

1. Cutaway, and the names of all its participants cited here, are pseudonyms.
2. My research at Cutaway included ethnographic field work, formal, and informal interviews over a one-year period that entailed more than 190 hours of intensive data collection, with tape recording and transcription to yield a language corpus for discourse analysis. I combed through those transcripts, organized chronologically, noting linguistic features aligned with specific moments, tasks, and events that arose throughout every phase of production. I selected Cutaway, along with another youth media program, as primary research sites based on four criteria: 1. they operated outside of school; 2. they centered on creative production; 3. learning was organized around sustained projects; 4. they were voluntary, tuition free and involved ethnically and economically diverse groups of young people. The analysis developed here builds on my study of more than 20 youth arts organizations across the United States, including an improvisational theatre troupe, a mural and graphic arts project, a cartooning program, and a group of zine writers working through a community-based agency. These studies were carried out both independently and, crucially, through my participation in a national research project directed by Shirley Brice Heath, building on her collaborative work with Milbrey McLaughlin, on learning and leadership in the non-school lives of youth (Heath, 2001; Heath & McLaughlin, 1994 a & b). Also key as a foundation for the research reported here was a study I joined in the early 1990s at Harvard Project Zero, directed by Jessica Davis (Davis et al, 1993), on community-based arts education.
3. This discourse excerpt, as well as the others highlighted here, were selected based on their representativeness of the larger patterns in the language corpus of reported speech use.

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