

Towards a “Slowed Down” Pedagogy: An Emergent Youth-Led Practice of Politicized Care

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Abstract: We discuss how youth “slowed down” an online STEAM makerspace during the COVID-19 pandemic, opening up new ways of being and doing together. The practices youth enacted in slowing down arose from their politicized care for one another. Adult mentors, through moments of slowing down, were given an opportunity to rethink how to listen to youth’s desired ways of doing STEAM. To discuss the implications of slowing down, this article features two instances in which Black youth “slowed down” in sessions to demonstrate their desired ways of being together/doing together within the STEAM context. Highlighting youths’ moves has implications for how educators think about co-designing programs with youth and how to enact politicized care in the face of rapid social, environmental, and political change.

Introduction

The typical pandemic Green Club (GC) meeting began with the images of the adult mentors huddled on a computer screen in individual tiles on a black background, chatting and waiting for youth to file into the Zoom room. The regulars usually joined before the allotted after-school time: Lulu and Shadow (sister and brother), Finn, and May appeared in their tiles one by one, though their rectangles typically featured their screen names instead of their faces. One of them, without fail, started us off with their usual question: ‘Can I show you guys something I drew?’ This question always elicited positive responses to the tune of “YEEEEESSSSS” and “please do!” in the chat from the mentors and the other youth. The youth who were regulars during the in-person STEM-Rich program integrated their recent art during each virtual Wednesday session with updates on what they had been drawing in their free time.

This ritual that developed is just one example of how youth “slowed down” (Shahjahan, 2015) our engagements in the virtual space of GC. Sharing artwork was eventually institutionalized in the agendas mentors created, allowing for more time to appreciate each other’s work that had taken place when we were not together. In this example of youth-led practice, youth show that “being with” (Villenas, 2019) each other is not precluded by being physically apart. Rather, there are ways to “be with” one another that center relationships, processes, and expressing critical discourses of the “multi-pandemic” (Calabrese Barton & Greenberg, 2021) that can emerge when youth have space to enact it.

We therefore discuss how youth helped adult mentors make space for their desired ways of engaging with each other and STEAM through slowing down in the virtual club. Slowed down pedagogy emerged during the peak of physical distancing practices and uncertainty of the future of the pandemic, when vaccines could not come fast enough and terms like “Zoom fatigue” (Schroeder, 2021) and “learning loss” (Merrill, 2021; Calabrese Barton & Greenberg, 2021) proliferated throughout educational discourses in the U.S.. We therefore emphasize the relational nature of the learning that took place in this year of GC. We argue that slowed down pedagogy has relevance to multiple educational contexts wherein educators are invested in being responsive to the ways that youth can reshape normative engagements/discourses. To support this argument, we explore how Black youth sought to reorganize practice in the remote STEAM makerspace, the “Green Club” (GC), by collaboratively engaging in a practice of *slowed down pedagogy* (Shahjahan, 2015) that built over the COVID-19 multi-pandemic. We position this slowing down as stemming from GC members’ *politicized care* (McKinney de Royston et al., 2017) for one another. We answer the questions: **How and why did youth “slow down” the learning environment through their discourses and practices? What impact did youths’ relationship building have on their opportunities to learn and become in STEAM?** In answering these questions, we begin to illustrate what “slowing down” can look like, and how it can be responded to by adult educators in order to transform learning environments towards equity.

Background

We start from the premise that youth are constantly developing, demonstrating, and sharing expertise in many different subjects, with STEAM being one of those, and that STEAM-rich making in a community oriented youth makerspace is a site for this sort of learning to occur (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2018). Foregrounding

youths' moves to "be with" (Villenas, 2019) each-other in the online format, we build on work that views STEAM learning as a constellation of relationships, practices, and discourses that ultimately position them as knowledgeable and creative STEAM makers. We also position it within work that aims to reimagine why we teach STEAM in the first place. Instead of centering labor and the projects of STEAM, we aim to center the relationships and alternative discourses that can take place within these contexts (Sengupta-Irving & Vossoughi, 2019). This is what we refer to as the "relational" aspects of learning; how youth and adults came together to co-create the experience of GC.

Much effort was required from families to reorganize time, priorities, and resources due to the pandemic (Jalongo, 2021). Our remote program took place during larger "community infrastructuring" efforts (Greenberg et al., 2020) which focused on "build[ing] capacity for disrupting injustice and supporting each other during the COVID-19 crisis" (Greenberg et al., 2020, pg 1). GC continuing into a socially distanced program held online was part of this move towards infrastructuring, in that it served as a space for youth to come together to create work and discuss the pandemic as it unfolded. The youth discussions and practices that are highlighted in this paper are part of "disrupting injustice and supporting each other" in the context of learning more about STEAM.

Theoretical frameworks: Slowing Down & Politicized Care

It was essential that the space of GC reflect caring relationships which recognized the multiple pressures on families and youth during the height of social distancing (Thompson et al., 2021). Slowed down pedagogy emerges from the nexus of politicized care and slowing down. This particular mixture creates a lens through which we can understand youths' projects, relationships, and interactions that does not center the end products of their work.

Politicized care encompasses the ways that adults of color care for youth of color, bringing attention to the politicized dimensions of their needs (McKinney de Royston et al., 2017). We build on the concept of politicized care to show not only how teachers or adult facilitators enact politicized care for their students, but how, in a setting where youth are co-constructors of the program, youth enact politicized care for each other. Politicized care can be seen in the relations between members of the learning community, such as when they affirm/build on/push on critical discussions about their lives that are often politicized (such as climate change or police brutality), or when they uplift each other as knowers and doers of STEAM who also carry vital community knowledge and ways of knowing.

Often, youth enacted moments of politicized care for one another, **slowed down** the GC agenda, often times to a point where it was changed entirely. We refer to 'slowing down,' initially conceptualized by Shahjahan (2015), as practices/moves that focus on the embodied nature of learning and "being with" (Villenas, 2019) each other, placing an emphasis on the bodily, emotionally, and socially shaped dimensions of youths' learning experiences. 'Slowing down' was one way that youth invited all participants to put aside learning expectations and norms that had developed over time in previous years as a way to care for each other. Occasionally, this meant that preexisting agendas would be thrown out in favor of youths' needs in the moment. We claim that 1) these efforts to slow down the STEAM program were led by youth, through discourses and practices that affirmed each other, and 2) this process of slowing down made space for critical and political discourses on substantive concerns about the world we live in, while also re-orienting their maker program/experiences/projects in ways that more explicitly reflected these forms of caring.

Methods

Context

GC has been a fixture for over a decade, in-person, at a local Great Lakes City, Midwest youth center. During the 2020-21 academic year, GC went virtual due to COVID-19 physical distancing guidelines. The virtual sessions were held on Zoom and lasted approximately one hour at least twice a week. The purposes of these meetings varied: one meeting (Monday) was dedicated to adult and youth researchers co-designing the topics, goals, and timelines of projects and sessions, while the other meeting (Wednesday) focused on making and working through the focal project for the semester. We had two semester-long projects (the "focal projects") where youth collaboratively planned, designed, and created projects that engaged both STEAM and their community, both widely construed. These were "2020 stories," where youth told their stories of the multi-pandemic using a broad array of materials, including anything from their homes and materials that could be distributed from the makerspace. Youth were encouraged to be imaginative and open-minded when thinking about what they could use to tell their stories, leading to a variety of project mediums such as paint on canvas, a written story, a coding project, and videos. The winter project was a podcast where youth talked about their

collective interests and learned how to use audio editing software. Each week youth ideated on new topics to discuss with each other and recorded it. They also broke into groups to work on other necessary projects for the podcast, such as creating the cover art and deciding how to edit.

Participants

The youth in this program are predominantly Black middle schoolers of various gender identities who live in GLC. Throughout the year, participation ebbed and flowed, but there was a core group of 5-7 youth that would consistently join in on the Monday and Wednesday meetings, though there could be anywhere from 2-10 youth in the session on a given day. There were 5 adult mentors, 2 of whom were White women, 1 Black woman, 1 Latinx woman, and 1 White man. Of this group, 3 of the adults are from or have lived for a while in the GLC community, and taught for many years in this program. All of these mentors are authors of this paper.

Data Generation

We engaged in data co-generation through critical ethnographic methods, which included writing field notes, video-recording sessions, saving Zoom meeting chat logs, collecting artifacts from sessions, and facilitating participatory, long-form interviews with youth twice throughout the school year. Data were analyzed as analytic memos of moments that stood out to adult researchers. In a second round of analysis, researchers debated-towards-consensus what types of “slowing down” were happening in different identified moments. Finally, we organized these types into analytic claims, mapping them to empirical evidence of how our shared youth-adult engagement forms shifted and transformed, and what that shifting/transforming revealed to us about slowed-down pedagogy in our program. All names mentioned here are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

Findings

We return to our original research questions to structure the findings. First, how and why did youth “slow down” the learning environment through their discourses and practices? We zoom into moments where they enact politicized care for one another by slowing down. In the introduction, we shared an example of youth creating a ritual that made space for sharing work and affirming one another. This ritual was one of an arrangement of practices that youth engaged in that showed politicized care for one another in a way that was developmentally appropriate and emphasized the importance of the quality of attention that we allow for the youth to enact.

Second, we answer the question: what impact did youths’ relationship building have on their opportunities to learn and become in STEAM? During the COVID-19 pandemic, youth’s relational learning took center stage in their work. We privilege this relational work while also drawing attention to the STEAM learning that they demonstrate through their practices. These enactments of politicized care productively slowed down GC and opened up new spaces for engaging in STEAM. Making explicit how youths’ relational development mattered in the space is important not only for understanding this in the context of the pandemic, but for designing future learning environments in which relational learning is valued. The two vignettes support our view of the importance of relational learning. In the first, we see how one of the youth calls attention to silence and uses it to spark critical discussion. In the second, we see how leaving space open for redirection can still lead to substantive learning while honoring the ways in which youth want to engage.

Negotiating the initial slowing down through calling attention to silence

Finn, a Black non-binary youth, has found a video relevant to what GC members would be interested in, and wants to share it. We show how Finn’s action of calling attention to “silence” and using it to make space for critical political discourse about both the environment and their futures is one way youth sought to slow down and re-orient their program around new directions and relationalities. In this first example, we describe a moment where an adult educator negotiates the activity with youth to slow down and support youths’ relationship building in STEAM.

In the moment, Luz, a Latinx femme adult mentor, is trying to engage the youth in their chosen project, creating a podcast. At the start of the session, during the time when youth shared updates about their work, Finn asked if they could share a video they saw online. Luz tried to keep the group on a schedule for the podcast, and asked if they could save it for later. She then started sharing platforms for editing a podcast to ask youth which one they would want to use. Between her explanations and sharing of websites, there were a handful of times where no one was talking or responding. During a particularly long pause, Finn called attention to it, saying “Question.” Luz invited them to ask, though it was hard to hear through the glitching of Finn’s audio.

“Why is it so quiet?” Finn asked, laughing. “I’m like, ‘uh oh, what happened?’ [...] it seems like we, kind of, don’t have anything else to talk about...” They said this slowly, knowing they were about to offer a subject change back to the video. Here, Finn does not reject the project, but puts forth a new idea for the group

to think about. None of the youth outright rejected the idea of working on the podcast at that time, yet they were trying to tell the adults something through their inaction/non-response. In this moment, Finn ‘broke’ a silence that came out of working on a project that they and the other youth were not engaging in at the moment. The silence created a space for taking a different direction than working on the podcast. Silence was a necessary first step as part of “slowing down,” which youth created and Finn stewarded.

In response to Finn trying to change the subject, Luz then asked the group if they should try to record something before listening to the video. Finn responded that it would be fine, but then proceeded to talk about “Dear 2045,” (SugarDaisy, 2020), which is “about all the stuff that happened last year [...] Technically, it’s about the pollution and all that stuff, and about how Donald Trump did all those [inaudible] things.” While they were explaining, Luz started sharing her screen, in an attempt to draw attention back to the podcast. During this time, Finn’s audio cut out, and Luz asked them if they could paste a link to it in the chat. She attempted for a few more minutes to engage the youth in the podcast. Luz’s audio went out for a minute, and Finn asked if they could share their screen. At this point, Luz recognized that this is important to Finn, and that the other youth are interested in what they have to share, so she stops pressing the project.

However, this was not without some collaborative efforts by the youth. For example, in moments when Finn’s audio would cut out, other youth would let them know in the chat they cannot hear Finn, with short messages like “I can’t hear you.” This was in tension with Luz’s moves to focus on the project, which used those moments when Finn’s audio would cut out as opportunities for redirecting back to the “main” project, such as sharing her screen when Finn was talking then asking them to paste it in the chat. When the other youth would actively support Finn’s idea of sharing the video through keeping their attention on them, Luz recognized their quality of attention for the podcast was and would not be good without first hearing Finn out. Recognizing and leaning into the quality of learners’ attention on a project was crucial for “slowing down,” and was a way that youth could show how they wanted to engage with each other and STEAM.

After Finn shared the music video for “Dear 2045” (with some technical hiccups), they told the group “exactly why [they] wanted to share it”: they thought it was a “great description of what’s happening in the real world” and they “love how these people, like, care about what’s going on.” Finn pointed out that people “think [climate change]’s a joke,” and sometimes “bully” people for caring about the environment. Finn said that this song might help people realize that climate change is a serious issue and that they should support people who care about it instead of bullying them. This song “inspires [Finn] to be more careful about what is going on around everybody else.” Finn shares why it is an important message for others to hear, remarking on the video’s ability to reach people in an emotional and “real” way. This demonstrates political clarity, which is an important aspect of politicized care, and was a necessary precursor for Finn to want to share with the group to begin with.

Negotiating the initial slowing down through calling attention to silence

We show how youth take up slowing down to collaborate and demonstrate their relationships with one another and continue to express critical discourse of the environmental crisis. This example takes place a few weeks after Finn shared the Dear 2045 video, during our updates time in the Wednesday session. Finn shared that they have been learning to sing the song “Snowman” by SIA. We all, youth and adults, encouraged them to sing it. After some technical issues, they sang it and it was beautiful. Lulu, another youth, was inspired to sing the same song. The session, similarly to the Dear 2045 session, was meant to be for working on our collective project. However, the youth wanted to sing and write music. This time, instead of trying to divert the youth to the plan, the adult mentors responded by supporting the writing of a “rap.” However, even though Lulu and Finn had shared out loud, writing the rap was quiet. The majority of the work took place in the chat. Any verbal contributions were to either support what was being said in the chat or to ask questions about the project to check in if they wanted to work on it.

Below, the final rap was edited in format to show the contributions between youth and adults. In the passage below, the adult contributions, primarily from Maria and Starr, are completely left aligned. Every other line has a different number of tabs which differentiates each youth: Lousie, Finn, Tris, and Lulu. This format is meant to give an idea of who contributed what, how, and when, while also emphasizing the artistic nature of the work the group engaged in.

Green Club investigators.... We like snakes and alligators!

 i am a dog, you see this tree? it is a log

 le bark bark.

I’m dog, but I like me fish.

 I eat food in my dog dish.

 i have a pet fish, her name is miss she lives in a dish.

i ate her she delish.
 My dog has a wish,
 to eat YOUR fish!
 Wait that's too violent, tisk tisk!
 When green club tries something, we never miss!
 Normally when I count time, I rhyme, not only that but I count dimes
 These things keep our earth alive, most things we need to survive
 like plants and water, like food and shelter
 I like dirt,
 the sun's our ice melter!
 When they see us they say hi but when we is mad they run and hide
 I water Kiri, he turns into a shark, when I go near Kachan he goes Bark Bark
 we all have superpowers, we just need to use them...angel
 I live in Space, I eat some grapes, and when I get tested I always Ace
 we don't stand down, we empower
 till my guinea pig bit. he devour.
 I feel betrayed. I've been attacked.
 i can only type with one finger and a half.
 ---gets holy bible and shouts S t a y b a c k!
 should i put hand sanitizer on the bite?
 it might burn but that is OK
 not finna become todoroki due to a sanitizer...
 we'll share more next time, so please stay!
 And
 help fight for the earth
 so it doesn't go away

At the end of the 30 minutes it took to write, the rap was performed by Tris, Lulu, and Shadow individually. During this time, they hyped each other up to sing it and when someone would stop midway, they would encourage each other to keep going. These practices are part of what they did to enact politicized care; they demonstrated communal bonds by being encouraging and writing together as a group. It was also a developmentally appropriate way for them to demonstrate their knowledge of STEAM while also expressing their views over the future of the environment.

We also see that the slowed down work extended over time and brought up ways for youth to engage with one another. The GC raps session happened because youth wanted to share their ability to sing/rap, which is something that has been done in different forms in the past but was brought back in an organic way. This rap was collaboratively produced in a way that was mostly quiet. For example lines such as “till my guinea pig bit. he devour. // I feel betrayed. I've been attacked. // i can only type with one finger and a half” were developed as youth talked about Lousie's guinea pig. We see how youth centered silence/listening in the creation of the rap because of how the chat influenced this. In the audio, we hear mostly the GC members saying positive things to each other and laughing along as we write. Youth/adults invite each other to share their thoughts by asking open questions or calling on each other for responses, recognizing when other people want to be able to speak so they listen and support them.

Learning across the examples

To discuss learning across these examples, we emphasize how youth learning took the form of relational work that supported how they engaged with STEAM. For instance, they demonstrate their knowledge production around the environment in both examples, both through their discussions of the future in the Dear 2045 example or through their invocations of needing to protect the earth. Youth share a powerful video about climate change, and illustrate the points where politicized care and slowed down pedagogy appear in their moves to make space for STEAM engagement by and for the other youth. This brings in critical political discourses about the world, their futures, and the environment.

Discussion

The featured vignettes are examples of how youth “slowed down” STEAM making through their politicized care for one another. Finn's experience as a youth and a long-time member of the group allowed them to enact politicized care for their peers in a way that Luz did not recognize at first. Finn's moves to “slow down” were

oriented around sharing the “Dear 2045” video, which opened up a conversation on the role of STEAM in society and how youth play a role—displaying political clarity. Luz, recognizing how silence and youths’ quality of attention were shaping the session, stepped back for Finn to take an active role in the moment. This points to the need for creating spaces for youth to slow-down as a way to support them in naming and enacting their desires for their program and their lives.

The whole group vignette where the youth co-wrote a rap together showed how from making space for slowing down there can be productive disruptions that take a different path to get where we want to go. Though the rap was not part of the plan, it was still part of what we envision as participating in STEAM. We were able to do this because we let go of the agenda and went with what youth showed us how to do in the moment. This points to how it is possible to find a balance between participating in STEAM in “traditional” ways while being responsive to youth. The implications of these points have reach in how we think about co-designing programs with youth and how we consider learning in general.

Implications for co-design with youth

We posit that slowing down can be a form of in the moment co-design with youth that seeks to maintain an overall vision of the learning that the space is designed for, while being attentive to the ways that youth want or need to interact with one another. While our Monday sessions featured explicit co-design time, where youth and adults came together to plan our projects and the overall timelines, in the moment co-design was equally as important for the overall implementation. Being able to negotiate the plan in the moment via slowing down is crucial to recognizing how youths’ relational work is playing into STEAM learning.

Implications for learning

We situate this form of learning within the narratives of “learning loss” that pervade pandemic educational discourse. We argue that youth are showing us in this space that they are actually learning much about subjects that are not often emphasized in schools. Youths’ work in this case sits at the margins of “learning loss” discourse, because what they are doing matters in profound ways yet is not recognized or valued. However, relational work is more important than ever in this time of isolation and social distancing. Further, the effects of the pandemic on entire generations of learners has yet to be seen. Research in the area of relational learning will continue to be important, and slowing down afforded a space to see this youth work.

Conclusion

This paper presents examples of how slowed down youth-led pedagogy, stemming from their politicized care for one another, contributed to youth’s STEAM learning and presented adult mentors an opportunity to rethink how they listen to youth. We share two vignettes, one featuring Finn, a Black youth in an informal STEAM program, who “slowed down” a session, and in doing so was able to share a powerful video about climate change and insights on the power of youth. We also shared an example of how a group of youth embodied this by collaborating on a rap that was written entirely in a chat on our online platform.

These examples show us that slowed down pedagogy allows for a shift in how we approach STEAM making so that it is less tied to neoliberal logics of production, innovation, and competition in favor of developing relationships, exploring new processes, and collaboration. Throughout this paper, we have illustrated the points where politicized care and slowed down pedagogy take precedence in youth’s moves. This lens offers us implications for both how we think about co-designing programs with youth, and how we work to de-center normative engagements with STEAM learning.

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