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Outside Learning Environments

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Abstract: The author examines the notion of learning environments while reflecting on a photographic method as an identity resource. As the photographic portraits migrate across spatial contexts and power relationships, the author theorizes about his research practice and the *settled expectations* in the learning sciences. In search of new constructs, terms and practices that foreground nondominant ways of being, he interrogates the dominant construct of *learning environment* in relation to Black spaces.

Introduction, position and purpose

In this paper, I theorize the notion of learning environments in the context of a longitudinal community-based design research project (Bang et al. 2016) in a cohort-based STEM program for nondominant youth in grades 6-11. Using the ongoing project as the background for this discussion, the goal of this paper is to ponder the ontology of *learning environments*—a term deeply entrenched in the vocabulary and epistemology of the learning sciences—in the context of nondominant, specifically Black spaces in and outside of education. I do so from a position of a learning scientist, a foreigner, a migrant with shifting racialized, cultural and linguistic identities working in a dominant Western academic, colonial space and anti-Black system, i.e., within an inherently violent socioeducational context (Sierschynski, 2019).

Photographs, identities and environments

The focus of our community-based design research project has been a simultaneous decentering of settled, settler-colonial expectations of what constitutes scientific practices and the notion of STEM (Bang, Warren, Roseberry & Medin, 2012). I introduced large scale photographic portraits as a main *identity resource* (Nasir & Hand, 2008; Nasir & Cooks, 2009) that rendered nondominant students, instructors and community scholars aesthetically as *being(s) in practice* and space. Ultimately the photographs became objects that they curated and exhibited in their homes. The movement and transformation of the photographs during the project from research data to sovereign objects, i.e., photographic portraits that were used (or stowed away) by the participants in their homes changed the frame of reference for thinking about my work as a researcher who (with the photos) migrated into the realm of public art, i.e., outside of learning environments.

Politicizing learning environments and commitments

Vakil (2020, p.93) writes, "I begin with the position that disciplines are themselves political in that they are dynamically evolving, historically accumulated representations of knowledge congealed together through complex interactions between history, politics, and culture (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Medin & Bang, 2014). Learning environments, therefore, always carry and convey political values." Most of us have been disciplined into understanding our participation as researchers in terms that have been defined without us, for us. One such construct is the heuristic of learning environments (Barron & Bell, 2015), a term that has historically allowed us to define a region of interest with broad connotations of arrangements often divided into formal and informal. In a more recent sociopolitical turn in the learning sciences, accepted heuristics are marked as never neutral, thus requiring both marking of space and self in terms of our positionality and commitments as scientists and citizens (Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017; Esmonde & Booker, 2016; Vakil, 2020). The Politics of Learning Writing Collective (2017) reaffirmed a direction that requires "more explicit attention to how power imbues the purposes, mechanisms, and consequences of learning, as well as our approaches to the design, study, and theorization of learning environments" (p.92).

In search of new constructs

What does one do when a construct generates normative epistemological commitments while suppressing nonconforming, nondominant personal commitments? Again Vakil (2020, p.88) points to possible paths worth pursuing: "Sometimes this will entail conceptual layering, thickening, or refining of these constructs, while at other times it may mean inventing new frames for seeing and imagining learning anew." So, what does it look like if a preexistent heuristic is in need of further specificity and why does it matter? Dumas and ross (2016) provide the following example in the context of Critical Race Theory (CRT) by refining CRT to become, BlackCrit, "BlackCrit becomes necessary precisely because CRT, as a general theory of racism, is limited in its

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ability to adequately interrogate what we call "the specificity of the Black" (Wynter, 1989)….it cannot fully employ the counterstories of Black experiences of structural and cultural racisms, because it does not, on its own, have language to richly capture how antiblackness constructs Black subjects, and positions them in and against law, policy, and everyday (civic) life" (p.417). Reading ross (2016) I was struck by what one of her main participants, Ms. C., a Black teacher said about *Black girl spaces*, i.e., specific, thick, refined, identity sustaining spaces: "A part of "just being them" entails the creation of a space where Black girls can hash out what it means to be themselves in an anti-black, patriarchal society" (p. 47). In the absence of such specificity, "the space couldn't really hold" their identities. Nondominant experiences call for thicker terminology that frame oppressed realities and spaces (see Hartman, 2019, Sojoyner, 2016, 2017 on enclosures). Serving as theoretical entry points for approaching oppressive socioeducational contexts and realities, thicker constructs offer the possibility of being able to represent nondominant spaces in ways that I think learning environments do not.

Conclusion

Given that learning scientists seek to understand learning across contexts, at times our research takes us into home environments. In the context of this project, my community participants and their families ultimately received the photographic portraits in their homes. Several of them curated and displayed the images so that they could be seen. In one case, the family of an instructor hung the portrait in a central location of their living room and begun hanging other family photos around it. Finally, thinking of interacting with spaces in the context of the ongoing, transgressive systemic murder of Black citizens in their homes, the need for nondominant intersectional constructs to talk/think about concurrently about learning and space becomes especially urgent. hooks (1990) writes,

> This task of making homeplace was not simply a matter of black women providing service; it was about the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that "homeplace," most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits. (p.384)

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