

Learning to be Open: Expansive Family Networks and Emotional Support as Connection Pathways

Maggie Dahn, Nickolina Yankova, Kylie Pepler
dahnm@uci.edu, nyankova@uci.edu, kpepler@uci.edu
University of California, Irvine

Jenny Lee, AmBer Montgomery, Scott Sikkema, Joseph Spilberg
jenny@capechicago.org, amber@capechicago.org, scott@capechicago.org, joseph@capechicago.org
Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education | CAPE

Abstract: We bridge Eco's theory of openness with a connected learning framework to explore how openness supports teaching artists designing for distance learning. We used case study methods to address our overarching question, *what is the value of openness for teaching and learning?* We found that an orientation toward openness supported teaching artists in designing learning experiences that expanded family networks and provided emotional support to connect youth to teachers, peers, and family across settings.

Introduction

Openness has been explored across contexts, including Eco's (1989) poetics of openness, characterized by a plurality of co-existing interpretations of a work of art. Though some educational theorists have discussed how openness and education intersect (e.g., Campbell, 2018), little work has explored how teachers explicitly use openness as a principle for design. In this poster, we bridge Eco's theory of openness with a connected learning framework (Ito et al., 2020) to explore how openness supports teaching artists designing for distance learning, guided by the following research questions: 1) How do teaching artists define openness in the context of their teaching and curriculum? 2) To what extent does an open approach support pathways to connected learning?

Background: Openness and connected learning

Eco (1989) emphasizes the end product of a work of art as a "work in movement," which invites multiple interpretations from the audience. Campbell (2018) extends Eco's poetics of openness as a pedagogical value teachers instill as students apply their "existential credentials" to interpreting works of art. Such open-ended processes are a hallmark of connected learning where openness has meant an openly-networked learning environment and an openness to approaches and settings (Ito et al., 2020). Within a digitally mediated landscape, connected learning recognizes that youth interests, supportive relationships, and future learning pathways are critical to enduring learning experiences (Ito et al., 2020). When bridging the connected learning framework with theories of openness, we can consider how openness intersects with relationship-building, youth interests, and pathways to future opportunities.

Methods

Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) is an established nonprofit arts organization that fosters long-term partnerships between teachers and teaching artists who co-teach inquiry-based, arts-integrated units in K-12 classrooms and after school programs. During the 2019-2020 academic year, CAPE staff curated professional development inviting its teachers and teaching artists to explore Eco's concept of openness within their curriculum and instruction. With the COVID-19 pandemic causing schools to close, openness took on a new form, prompting reflection on issues like space, the body, student voice, and identity (Sikkema, 2020).

This poster presents a case study (Stake, 1995) to describe how CAPE teaching artists designed for openness. We triangulated across semi-structured interviews transcribed via Zoom, original Tumblr posts showcasing work teaching artists shared with their students, and written multimedia reflections. 50% (17/34) of teaching artists participated in the study, a representative sample across arts disciplines, grades taught, and years with CAPE. We selected teaching artist Aram Atamian to illustrate links between connected learning and openness. Aram taught photography and theatre and had been working with CAPE for 1 year, describing himself as an "interdisciplinary diasporan artist." We used an open approach to coding to understand how teaching artists enacted openness within their teaching and mined for evidence of how open approaches intersected with connected learning. We looked for the following themes: *focus on relationships; expanding youth social networks; sponsorship of youth interests; shared practices; shared purpose; and connecting learning across settings.*

Findings

We found that artists described openness as *flexibility, improv, adapting; a focus on process more than product; something for which there were intentional structures; about following students' lead and continual discussion; offering agency; choice, and options; embracing possibilities, exploration, and imagination; and 'breaking' the school day*. Openness took on a different form during the pandemic, which stretched teaching artists to be, as one artist put it, "even more open." Teaching artist Aram described openness as "getting it wrong" and "not worrying about getting it right." He created space for "emotional openness" in his lessons through informal life check-ins with students and making space for their lived experiences. He emphasized individual perspective and "continual discussion" when interpreting images. To Aram, openness was intentional and "deliberately structured." In terms of space, he described a shift in the physical layout of the classroom, using openness to rethink and "break the school day." In designing for distance learning online, Aram encouraged activities away from the digital screen such as sending students on what philosopher Guy Debord named a *dérive*, or a new walk around a familiar place. For this exercise, Aram invited students to explore their homes from different levels and angles and to observe how the walk shifted their perceptions of familiar spaces and corners.

Openness to strengthen relationships and build networks between families

Aram reflected on how the pandemic created an unexpected opening to *strengthen family relationships* by inviting families to be part of the learning experiences he and his co-teacher designed. For the Poetry Chain project, Aram and his co-teacher introduced students to haikus through reading examples and explicitly teaching the "5-7-5" structure. To begin, one student wrote a haiku, which was then given to a different student to take a photograph representing the haiku. Finally, this photograph was given to another student's parents to write an additional haiku inspired by the photograph without reading the original haiku. The three elements—two haikus and the photograph—were then presented as a cohesive unit, which revealed "humorous, poignant, surprising variations of perspective between generations." A focus on family relationships allowed Aram to *connect learning across settings* to break down the boundaries between school and home and leverage family cultural assets to surface everyday practices that might otherwise go unnoticed. In reflecting on the success of the family photography unit, Aram explained that he "really wanted to design more projects that are explicitly about inter-family collaboration" and find new ways for students and families to purposefully interact. By operating from a place of "emotional openness," Aram highlighted the value of building and expanding upon youth social and family networks that could open new pathways to learning. Families can be positioned as experts who connect students to resources needed to further their interest-driven learning, including necessary materials, a place to do their work, and discipline-specific expertise (Ito et al., 2020). Social networks within the class created feelings of connectedness across families and sparked additional ways to connect to resources and opportunities.

Discussion

In this poster we demonstrated how teaching artists' orientation toward openness supported the design of online learning experiences that expanded inter-family networks and provided emotional support to students. Implications extend how openness and connected learning manifest in learning environment design, with an emphasis on how openness was translated through teaching artists' pedagogy. Our study emphasizes the value of cultivating supportive relationships between teachers and students and connection-building through family networks. Through intentional design choices motivated by openness, teaching artists can create connection pathways that strengthen family relationships and connect learning across settings.

References

- Campbell, C. (2018). Educating openness: Umberto Eco's poetics of openness as a pedagogical value. *Signs and Society*, 6(2), 305–331. <https://doi.org/10.1086/695567>
- Eco, U. (1989). *The open work*. (A. Cancogni, Trans.) Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1962).
- Ito, M., Aram, R., Conley, D., Gutiérrez, K., Kirshner, B., Livingstone, S., Michalchik, V., Penuel, W., Peppler, K., Pinkard, M., Rhodes, J., Salen Tekinbas, K., Schor, J., Sefton-Green, J., & Watkins, S.G. (2020). *The Connected Learning Research Network: Reflections on a decade of engaged scholarship*. Connected Learning Alliance.
- Sikkema, S. (2020). Navigating COVID-19 and school closures via a connected network of teachers, artists, and students. In K. Fashing-Varner, S. Bickmore, D.G. Hays, P. Shrader, D. Carlson & D. Anagnostopolous (Eds.), *The corona chronicles: On leadership, processes, commitments, and hope in uncertain times*. DIO Press.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.