

Multimodal Play and Adolescents: Notes on Noticing Laughter

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I explore laughter as a form of multimodal play in which adolescents' engage across contexts and in various configurations. With a few recent exceptions, a focus on unscripted play is largely missing from ongoing research and discussion about the education of adolescents. Whereas the space to play has been vitally important to the ways that young people communicate and build relationships in the different settings where I have conducted fieldwork, the play of adolescents is also frequently misinterpreted within school-based and community settings and often remediated or punished. Adolescents' practices of manipulation and experimentation with various media and technologies are the focus of two scenes I include of adolescents' playful engagements with video and their immediate contexts in which laughter serves as a medium of play. This article was written with educators and researchers of/with adolescents in mind, with the hope of encouraging greater reflection about how and what we notice about young people's play: there may be glimpses of being and becoming in the space of a giggle.

Key words: Multimodality, Play, Laughter, Video, Adolescents



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“To learn, I believe, is to become, to become different. It is to continue making new connections in experience, new meanings, if you like. ... This is the power of imagination--to break through the crusts of the conventional and the routine, to light the slow fuse of possibility.”

--Maxine Greene (2007)

Giggles. High pitched squeals of delight. The infectious staccato of a chortle that unfurls into full-blown waves of laughter, sometimes hearty and continuous and other times abrupt and breathy. These are the sounds that have filled the youth centered spaces in which I have spent time as an ethnographer for nearly fifteen years: parks and local eateries, community centers, libraries, and, for over a decade, alternative to incarceration and alternative to detention programs. Laughter, in its many varieties and forms, permeates these spaces and the practices within them, even as discourses of discipline, punishment, remediation, and surveillance abound.

We are living in a time when young people’s play is not only coming under increased scrutiny, but the consequences of misread play are sometimes fatal. As I write this in the spring of 2015, the names of adolescents who have been victims of police shootings have assumed a seemingly permanent place in the news headlines, and new names and stories are shared in a near-constant stream across social media platforms. The bodies of these mostly Black, mostly male youth who are at the center of these stories are repeatedly viewed, interpreted, and responded to as sources of suspicion, a pattern that has been documented and discussed across academic research and the popular press for decades (Blow, 2014; Ferguson, 2001; Youdell, 2003). Adolescents’ embodied practices, such as their choice of clothing, styles of interaction and postures, and the places they occupy, can place them in a position of being viewed as “looking suspicious.” For some youth, the labeling of their social and cultural practices through the prism of suspicion begins in childhood, long before they enter adolescence.

In her multi-year study at an elementary school, Ferguson (2001) studied interactions between students and teachers and observed teachers’

persistent attitudes toward young, black boys as “troublemakers.” She offers the following caution:

“There are serious, long-term effects of being labeled a Troublemaker that substantially increase one’s chances of ending up in jail. In the daily experience of being so named, regulated, and surveilled, access to the full resources of the school are increasingly denied as the boys are isolated in nonacademic spaces in school or banished to lounging at home or loitering in the streets.” (p. 230)

She goes on to describe “removal from classroom life...at an early age” as “devastating, as human possibilities are stunted at a crucial formative period of life” (p. 230). As educators and researchers, we participate in some of the same discursive geographies that inscribe the practices of adolescents’ with doubt, as Lesko’s (2012) words help to describe further:

Static ideas about youth have helped to keep in place a range of assumptions and actions in and out of secondary schools. For example, since adolescents have raging hormones, they cannot be expected to do sustained and critical thinking, reason many educators. Since adolescents are immature, they cannot be given substantive responsibilities in school, at work or at home (p. 189-190).

The impulse here may be to begin by asking how teachers, and adults in general, respond to the embodied practices of youth, in classrooms, the hallways of school, outside of school, and throughout the youths’ movements across communities. I propose that we start by looking inward and paying attention to what it is that we are noticing in the first place. Do we see through the lens of control (wherein young people’s movements are interpreted as demonstrating or lacking control) or do we view adolescents’ practices from an assumption of agency and engagement? As this question suggests, too often acts of noticing are filtered through a rubric of deviance.

How we notice is shaped by our physical as well as our conceptual and social location in relation to young people. Thus, we might hold onto the question: From what orientation are we noticing the practices and actions of adolescents who are the focus of our

teaching, documentation, or other engagement? And to what extent are claims of (lack of) control and the need for remediation and containment based on the expressive, communicative, and non-linguistic semiotic repertoires of youth who already experience this heightened surveillance in their daily lives?

What I describe in more detail below as multimodal play can also be viewed as an invitation to attend differently to the educational contexts that we design and research. The proposal implicit in this invitation is that the embodied ways with which youth interact with the world – with institutions, places, people, situations – should not be dismissed or hastily categorized according to a priori rubrics of behavior. There is a depth of meaning to be found in the subtle, sustained, sometimes fleeting communicative practices of adolescents, and of human beings more broadly. For youth, however, the interpretations of their actions prove to be consequential in shifting the course of their lives. For example: fidgeting is viewed as a sign of Attention Deficit Disorder that must be medically treated; limited English language proficiency of emerging bilinguals is viewed as a reason to be placed in remedial classes; or joking around with classmates earns the label of troublemaker that follows a child into adolescence when reputation is the thin line between being given the benefit of the doubt or not. It is into this set of complicated and shifting equations in the educational landscape I re-introduce a focus on play.

My goal in this article is to advocate for serious consideration of adolescents' play, playfulness, and play-like practices in their communicative practices. I do not focus explicitly on adolescents' literacies, however an understanding of literacies as situated, multiple, and multimodal saturates the conceptual framing of both projects I discuss below. Furthermore, rather than presenting a comprehensive heuristic for play here, I focus on laughter as a key part of the play I have observed in my work with youth. However, it is important to note that play in the larger project also

encompassed practices and evidence of silliness, discursive playfulness in the form of teasing, playing games of many kinds, dramatic play, and the engagement with a wide range of media and other modal resources. If, as Paley (2004) invites us to consider, it is in and through their play that children imagine possible lives, rehearse multiple scenarios,

and aesthetically declare their place in the world, then laughter may be viewed as a medium of that play. Thus, for the purposes of this article, laughter is the primary focus of the analysis and discussion that I present by drawing on two examples from ethnographic research with adolescents roughly ten years apart.

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Multimodal Play

"If people never did silly things, nothing intelligent would ever get done."

--Ludwig Wittgenstein (1984)

Youth are consistently seeking opportunities to pursue play that is "central to the rhetorics of creativity in childhood" (Marsh, 2010, p. 21) as they move into and out of institutionally sanctioned spaces where room for play has significantly narrowed. Across youth studies, play and storytelling share an intimate bond as co-pilots of young people's imagination and creativity (Wohlwend, 2008). This body of research shows how meanings are expressed and manipulated through oftentimes unscripted and playful engagement with a wide range of modes (visual, aural, gestural) and media (print, drawing, video). Consequently, expression is imbued with aesthetic meanings that are frequently overlooked. To render visible this expressive variability, I draw upon the conceptual lens of multimodality in dialogue with the traditions of research on play.

Multimodal play is a phrase that calls attention to the spontaneous, unscripted, undirected, and often unpredictable interactions young people have with the modal resources and materials around them (technologies, furniture, clothing; anything can potentially be a mode with which to communicate).

The term brings together the lenses of multimodality with existing discussions of play, which experiences a noticeable gap in the research literature in the chronological distance from children and adolescents. Whereas play is “central to the rhetorics of creativity in childhood” (Marsh, 2010, p. 21), play is decidedly less present and more regulated for older children and youth, as I note in more detail below. The ethnographic study by Ito and colleagues (2010) of youths’ online practices highlighted a range and variation in the ways that young people were participating in and mediating emerging digital landscapes. Johnson has detailed the nuanced ways that teens manipulate popular culture texts – in which she includes clothing and dress as well as jokes and humor – to perform identities and to play with meanings about themselves in classrooms and schools (Johnson, 2011; Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012). The youth in both of the studies noted above engaged in ample forms of unscripted and spontaneous interactions with modes that were playful in nature. Play, in these instances, is serious even as it is sometimes unintentional. Thus, multimodality is central to the communicative practices of youth and there continue to emerge numerous examples of youth using – by which I mean, exploring, manipulating, hacking, repurposing and other forms of engagement – various tools and artifacts as modes through which they are communicating, representing, and engaging in various other expressive practices that fall under the broader heuristic of literacies (Guzzetti & Bean, 2013; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010).

Play, Paley (2004) further argued, is not only the central activity of childhood but vital to young children’s development into being and becoming people. “What an astonishing invention is this activity we call fantasy play,” she mused, and wondered, “Are we really willing to let it disappear from our preschools and kindergartens?” (p. 7). Paley advocated for teachers to encourage the fantastical imaginations of children, even as and especially because of the unexpected places to which their ideas will travel, noting that “fantasy play provides the nourishing habitat for the growth of cognitive, narrative, and social connectivity in young children” (p. 8). Dyson (1997), like several others, has argued for the importance of narrative play in the development

of children’s literacy and illustrates the ways in which children engage and effectively remix their existing knowledge of popular culture to play with new scenarios, imagined life histories, and to take on imagined identities. And, citing Vygotsky’s axiom that “the freedom of play is ‘illusory’” (p. 1978, p. 103, cited in Dyson, 1997, p. 13), Dyson acknowledged that although children’s play is never quite free from cultural meanings, the opportunity to play – to imagine, to fantasize, to enact the improbable – can also present opportunities for children to “negotiate a shared world” (p. 13) and in doing so examine and possibly remake social arrangements, if only for short periods of time.

More recently, bringing play together with the increasingly digitally mediated landscapes of childhood, Marsh (2010) noted that “play and technology are frequently positioned as oppositional” (p. 23). She described play as “an activity which is complex, multi-faceted and context-dependent” and that digitally mediated play can be viewed as beneficial because of skills gained during play such as “technical and operational skills, knowledge and understanding of the world and subject-specific knowledge in areas such as literacy and mathematics” (p. 24).

While the study of childhood play has a rich foundation (Dyson, 1997; Paley, 2004; Sutton-Smith, 1997), research about and opportunities for adolescents’ play is sparse. In fact, the very nature of unfettered play has sharply declined in the last several decades, particularly in the United States. Gray (2011) used the term “free play” to identify what I refer to as “unfettered play” and notes:

the term free play refers to activity that is freely chosen and directed by the participants and undertaken for its own sake, not consciously pursued to achieve ends that are distinct from the activity itself (p. 444).

Citing findings by historians of play, Gray (2011) observed a shift in the amount and type of play in which children and adolescents have been engaged beginning around the middle of the twentieth century. In the place of this free play, Gray argued, has come a significant amount of adult structured play in the form of organized sports and similar activities that

mimic the extrinsic motivations of schooling. The current national discourse of testing and accountability leaves many teachers feeling that there is little room for unscripted moments within the school day. In contrast, the wisdom belied by the simplicity of Wittgenstein's (1984) words above is redolent of young people's unfettered proclivities for curiosity and innovation that have been symbolic staples in my research with youth.

Being and Becoming in Laughter

As I observed adolescents in different settings, laughter in young people's play became harder and harder to ignore. Over time, I became increasingly interested in the nature of young people's laughter, which is a focus slightly apart from the object of their laughter. Parvulescu (2010) made this distinction in her study of laughter itself (rather than laughter *about*) and posed the following questions, which have served as a heuristic in how I have begun to revisit laughter in my fieldwork:

- “What does the body in laughter look like?
- How does laughter sound?
- Where, in what places, is it likely to burst?
- What does it mean for two or more people to laugh together?
- What work (or unwork) does laughter do?
- What kind of subjects are we when we laugh?
- What does it mean to be a laugher, to anchor one's subjectivity, however provisionally, in “I laugh, therefore I am (or am not)”?” (p. 3)

Distinct images dance across my mind as I ponder each of these questions, and they include laughter that is inclusive as well as exclusionary, or laughter that causes someone to physically move or be moved. In each of these and several dozens of other examples, two of which I include below, laughter does not exist in a vacuum, but is, in fact, situated and responsive to the context in which, as Parvulescu (2010) might say, it bursts. Thus, my focus here is on the interaction between modal resources of a context and the laughter that bursts, unfolds, ripples, and permeates in that moment of interaction. And rather than ask what laughter leads to or what is learned in laughter, I was more concerned with what was happening in and around the laughter and, in a broader sense, the

overarching research questions of the ongoing study focus on how young people are making themselves known. I also take another cue from Parvulescu (2010) as an ethnographer whose analytic orientation is invited to shift in an attempt to more fully appreciate laughter, itself:

“The ethnographer would read through and describe the layers of signification surrounding any given burst of laughter at both the production and receiving ends. But while Geertz believes the ethnographer can, at least provisionally, conclude that a given wink ‘says’ something, laughter as such does not ‘say’ anything, although it can illuminate the context in which it bursts.” (p. 21)

Within the New York City contexts in which my graduate students and I locate our inquiries, we observe play and laughter in many forms. And in most of the interactions we have analyzed in which laughter-filled play is evident, the body serves as the site of play as well as a form of representation, itself a mode of playful engagement. Most of these community-based alternative settings are filled predominantly with male youth who self-identify as Black, African American, Latino, or Hispanic. And it is in the re-reading of their bodies in play that we hope to inform the *a priori* suspicion narratives that currently circulate about too many young people.

Bodies Bursting in Becoming

Between 2002 and 2003, I spent fifteen months engaged in ethnographic fieldwork for my dissertation with five, African American, middle-school aged boys whom I had met when they were fifth graders. We initially came together for the purposes of exploring new media for storytelling, which was the broader aim of my study, but quickly formed a group identity characterized by the practices of aimless wanderings, digital explorations, media making, and ample amounts and forms of play. Most of our time together was spent outside of school and we convened at public locations in the vicinity of the boys' adjacent neighborhoods. A majority of our time was split between the park (during warmer months) and the public library (during colder months and whenever it rained). We also spent an inordinate

amount of time at the nearby McDonald's, which was one of the few public places that accommodated our playfulness and occasionally boisterous media production processes as I describe in further detail below.

This group space was collaboratively formed by the six of us – Cyrus, TJ, Romeo, Jamal, Shawn, and me – and organically unfolded in response to an idea that arose from the group. In other words, we did not have pre-set goals or curricula to follow. We were also free from many of the constraints that increasing numbers of after-school and community-based programs are facing, largely as a result of reporting requirements from funding agencies which seek to measure out of school time through the lens of its relevance to in-school goals (Gadsden, 2008). This is an unfortunate reality that not only impacts the out of school contexts that young people occupy, but also adversely impacts the fields of study related to understanding adolescent learning by inhibiting choice and “free play” (Gray, 2011).

Each time we met, I would bring with me my royal blue colored backpack filled with the same collection of digital tools and media: digital voice recorders, digital still and video cameras, and a laptop. Whether we had planned to use the technologies or not, they were made available. I later described this approach as taking a multimodal stance in pedagogy, one in which the assumption of multiple forms of expression and communication are embodied in the way the interaction space is set up with the availability of various modal resources without a priori outcomes or instructions. While I did not set out to teach the group of boys a particular skill, per se, this study echoed what my colleagues and I have written about elsewhere as a “research pedagogies” approach to literacy research with adolescents (Wissman, Staples, Vasudevan, & Nichols, 2015).

It is perhaps not difficult to imagine that time spent hanging out with a group adolescent boys, ranging in age from 10-13 for the duration of our time together, would include lots of laughter. Embedded within and surrounding that laughter were vibrant of examples of negotiated identities, fleeting moments of belonging, and intertextual narrative work.

Scene 1: Coming into being on camera.

One summer afternoon, five of us were walking back to the park where we had originally convened after a visit to a local pie shop that Romeo had been raving about and a quick stop at the nearby corner store to pick up something to drink. On most of our outings, I paid for our snacks and this time was no different. We took our drinks and first went to find Shawn, who had said that he could not meet with us that day. Cyrus suspected that he was visiting family out of town, but TJ skeptically postulated that Shawn did not want to be a part of our group any more. TJ's logic was clear: if you're not here, then you're not part of the group. The trip to Shawn's house, which was slightly out of the way and the farthest distance from our usual meeting spots, was also marred by an encounter with a very loud and sizable dog that lived in the neighboring brownstone. To say that we sprinted away from the barking dog would be an understatement.

By the time we had reached the edges of the neighborhood where Cyrus, Romeo, and Jamal lived, our bodies stretched out into a train-like formation, with TJ walking a few dozen feet in front of us and leading the way. Cyrus was also in front but a little closer, while Jamal was lagging behind and then running up ahead of Cyrus. Romeo walked with the camera in hand almost adjacent to me. Occasionally Romeo would pause to record something – a squirrel running up a tree, the street underneath his feet as he walked and stopped – or apply any of the several effects available to apply to the filming. Romeo's regular documentation was something I looked forward to watching after each time we met; he provided me with another set of insights into how the same moment can be experienced and storied (Vasudevan, 2006).

Without warning, Cyrus spun on his heel holding a plastic soda bottle in his right hand, faced Romeo, and declared that he was going to “do a commercial.” And then, to make sure I also knew what was going on, Cyrus exclaimed, “Ms. Lalitha, I'm gonna do a commercial, ok?” and proceeded to say and do the following (Figure 1 features three stills from the video that Romeo filmed.):

Cyrus [standing next to the green, 20 ounce plastic bottle he has placed on the ground and giving Romeo and Jamal, who has now joined us, spontaneous stage direction]: Just act like you shot me, all right? Just act like you shot me. (He makes a fake sounding “shooting” or “whooshing” noise and mutters under his breath) “I’m dead” (His voice trails off as he pretends to fall to the ground.) But before collapsing completely, Cyrus says, “Ooh!” and points to the green plastic soda bottle while crouched down on the sidewalk. “A Sprite!” he says, enthusiastically, and takes a long drink from the green bottle. As he does so, the camera pans in close on Cyrus’s face as he says, “I’m fine!” His voice rises as he says the final words of the commercial and immediately follows his performance by nodding vigorously, grinning widely, and asking loudly, “You get that? You get that, [Romeo]?”

What the laughter, and the surrounding play – with roles, responsibilities, materials, space, genre – also illustrate is the nature of the space in which an artifact like the Sprite commercial came to be produced, and the boys’ relationship to that space. The commercial “burst” into being within a space that was already filled with the materiality of the city and the practices we had cultivated in the group. For example, as Cyrus performs this 23 second clip, the only other voice that can be clearly heard is Romeo’s as he assures his friend that the camera is on and ready to record with a simple but earnest, “Yeah.” By this point in our fifteen months of meeting together regularly, Romeo had spent more time filming and photographing with both digital still and video camera than the others in the group.

The filming of the commercial is followed by the boys’ giggles as Cyrus rushes over and asks to see what Romeo just filmed. We stood on the sidewalk huddled around the small 1.5” x 2.5” display screen of the Sony Hi8 video camera and watched while Romeo pressed play. For several seconds we hear the sounds of the traffic passing by, live behind us and on the small screen. Then, Cyrus appears on the screen and more laughing and pointing ensues. Romeo’s eyes remained glued to the camera screen, although he, too, is smiling widely. The impromptu filming was preceded and followed by laughter and the very existence of the artifact calls to mind Marsh’s (2010) musings on children and toys:

“Whatever the nature of the toys to hand, children have long displayed the ability to be creative in their use of them, no matter how limiting they appear to be to adult observers.” (p. 34)

In this spirit, Cyrus and Romeo routinely engaged in spontaneous media play, sometimes to produce a commercial artifact, as in the Sprite advertisement. They also recorded numerous versions of their interpretations of the local and national news and, in doing so, engaged discursive play as a way of experiencing the material and imaginative world(s) (Wohlwend, 2008). Sometimes these productions were accompanied by the sort of giggles that are the hallmark of adolescent nervousness in the face of unknown audiences or when placed in unfamiliar circumstances. Other times, the productions included moments of more fleeting multimodal play in which no tangible artifact was produced. The space for laughter to take root and be central to the authoring – of selves, of texts, of relationships – by youth can be challenging to cultivate, particularly as these multimodal play spaces often exist within



Figure 1. Stills from the Sprite Commercial

institutions with their own assumptions and expectations about how adolescents should comport their bodies and control their impulses, among them, the impulse to laugh. The challenge of cultivating such a space where laughter is seen as adding to rather than detracting from whatever is happening in that space continues to exist and is a frequent comment I receive whenever I share work related to adolescents' laughter. And, it is a dilemma that I have faced as my ethnographic work has taken on an increasingly pedagogical tenor.

Preparing for the Spontaneity of Play

Since 2009, my project team and I have been facilitating workshops at Voices, an alternative to detention (ATD) program for youth ages 11-15 who have been arrested and mandated to the afterschool program that offers its participants a range of educational activities, mentoring experiences, community supervision, and legal services. Through the Reimagining Futures Project, which was initiated and designed with the Voices staff and former court-involved youth several years ago, we facilitate workshops designed to cultivate the youth participants' sense of self and critical engagement with the world around them by building on their digital literacy practices and engaging a wide range of arts-based and multimodal methods of communication and expression. Our workshops are designed with pedagogical flexibility wherein we view youth as cultural producers, and as such, we are committed to providing spaces for their creative capacities to take be made visible and find audiences.

Our ways of working as a team, like the makeup of the team itself, have evolved over the last six years of the project, and all workshops include media play, storytelling, questioning, and different forms of making artifacts. As a team we meet weekly to discuss workshops and engage in ongoing reflection of our practice as facilitators and what we are observing and learning from the youths' participation in the workshops. We also discuss pedagogical challenges, one of which has continued to be a question of how to make the most of a single workshop opportunity in

order to account for a constantly shifting enrollment that is true of most community-based alternative programs.

This question moved us to begin viewing differently not only what we sought to do, but also what and how we observed during the workshops themselves. What emerged consistently as a salient element of nearly all of our time with Voices participants was the range and variation of their play and specifically the significance of playfulness as a mediating element in other forms of engagement. While spontaneity is a hallmark of the kind of free play that we found to hold the most potential for the adolescents' imagination, we sought to avoid scripting play into our workshops. We instead embraced a pedagogy of play (Vasudevan, DeJaynes, & Schmier, 2010) through which we encouraged "textual explorations, reconfigured teaching and learning relationships, and [performed] new roles with and through media technologies and media texts" (p. 7). To do so, we routinely made available and encouraged the engagement of, through our pedagogical practices, a range of modalities with which youth could participate in the workshops, including digital media tools (cameras, digital voice recorders, and occasionally laptops), pens, paper, mixed media supplies, and more. It was in the context of a self-contained digital media workshop that the following scene unfolded. At the time, we had been facilitating workshops at Voices for three years and were very familiar with the staff and, more importantly, they were familiar with our ways of working that was largely premised upon a pedagogy of play.



We instead embraced
a pedagogy of play.

Scene 2: High-fives

Filming that was done at Voices one afternoon shows the camera following James, a young man of 15 years, as he walks from room to room inside the small office space wearing a wide grin on his face and approaches various staff members to give them a "high five" greeting. Although his hand is initially poised mid-air, James is, in fact, only pretending to greet the people he interacts with using a raised hand, a potential high-

five; at the last second, he slaps his own thigh instead of offering his hand to his interlocutor's awaiting hand. Each subsequent successful fake-out results in increased laughter, primarily from James but occasionally also from his cameraman, Darius, and some of the surrounding program staff and participants. In between bouts of laughter, he can be heard saying "It's part of the camera, it's part of the camera!" as if to put the blame for the prank on the camera. The people James and Darius encounter in the office suite include the program coordinator, the program director, a counselor, other participants, and the receptionist, all of whom indulge and even play along with the "fake high fives."

In this scene, James, a young man of 15 at the time, is accompanied by Darius, also 15 and his cameraman for the afternoon. After Melanie, a grad student working with the Reimagining Futures project team, showed Darius some basic functionality, the two of them began walking and talking and filming. Using Parvulescu's (2010) proposed heuristic, one could describe what James' body in laughter looked like: animated, bouncy, in constant motion as he swayed while walking from person to person, his red plaid shirt a blur as his arms rushed in a downward motion again and again while pretending to greet his potential interlocutors and then taking his hand away. A wide grin complemented his scrunched up nose and crinkled eyes, as he appeared to remain in a state of humor while thoroughly enjoying other people's reactions to him.

Panning out somewhat, both spatially and temporally, we can see that the high-fives between James and various adults in the space were preceded by ritualistic practices of greetings and checking in between the participants and the staff. Some of the other participants ate snacks that were made available to them, and others sat quietly, were seen to be using their phones for various purposes, or were speaking with one of the other staff members. Although the actual impromptu walk around the Voices offices only lasted a few minutes in duration, the filmic representation and the moment itself hold meaning about the larger context in which the filming took place. A few things are readily evident from what can be seen and heard on the video: the youth had access to media with which to record; there are several

different kinds of activity happening at once; the youth participants were not dismissed by the staff members with whom they interacted; laughter was not sanctioned or cause for reprimand.

Of course, one glimpse by itself can only hold a limited amount of information. This clip, however, is representative of interactions we observed numerous times in which the unfettered multimodal play of the youth participants found fertile ground that seeded subsequent text production, digital exploration, and other forms of learning. The laughter-fueled play at the beginning of the afternoon, for example, was followed by another couple of hours of multimodal play with the camera. Minutes after their video pranking, James, Darius, and several other participants, a couple of Voices staff members, and another two workshop facilitators left the building and engaged in impromptu filming in an area of downtown Manhattan that included the challenge of receiving and documenting free hugs from strangers (for more on the filming of free hugs, see Vasudevan et al. 2014). The initial laughter begat more as the locations shifted from offices to outdoor space and as more participants were engaged in the activities surrounding the filming.

"To Become Different"

In the opening epigraph, Greene (2007) links imagination with a person's learning journey and suggests that learning itself is an ever-unfolding act of becoming. As proposed above, to look at being and becoming is to consider any given moment for both what it is but also from whence it came in to where it is leading. The Sprite commercial as an artifact helps us to begin to understand what kind of space existed for the kind of play with media (that is embodied by the artifact and catalyzed by other artifacts, such as the video camera and plastic bottle) to come into being. And pedagogically, we can look at this construction-on-the-fly as suggestive of where one might take or scaffold the work next. In this scenario, as with James and the high-fives, the young people's becoming was rendered visible.

But is it meaningful? Implied in this question about all of this focus on laughter and multimodal play are (perhaps) assumptions about what is and is not

meaningful and the extent to which the practices that youth are engaged in outside of school must somehow demonstrate value for schooling. For my research team and I, and for the young people with whom we work and from whom we learn, the meanings are rooted in the understandings about adolescents' becoming that emerge when we look closely at play, and specifically when we take laughter seriously.

Our pedagogical challenge has become effectively striking a balance between preparing for spontaneous multimodal play and allowing that play to move us in unexpected directions, in the activities that unfold, conversations that emerge, and texts that are produced. To allow play to flourish, and for play to be and become the fertile ground for where relationships, questions, literacies, narratives, and other forms of being/becoming people in the world can take root requires a pedagogical nimbleness that Gustavson (2008) has described as educators taking an ethnographic stance that honors the "*personhood* of each student" (p. 112, emphasis in original). As he notes,

"An ethnographic understanding of the ways in which youth perform, improvise, self-reflect, form communities of practice, and assess their work allows us to treat students as people with 'desires still to be tapped, possibilities still to be opened and pursued' (Greene, 2003, p. 111)" (Gustavson, 2008, p. 111).

In a complementary tenor, Jones and Woglom (2013) embody multimodal play in the way they graphically represented pre-services teachers' experiences in a teacher education course in the form of a graphic novel. They argue, through narrative and through the use of narratively constructed images in the graphic novel, that the body can be a site of critical and social change and educators must attend to *how* they move, feel, occupy space, and interact with one another and their students. This embodied self-reflection of how one experiences the world naturally extends to the ways that teachers understand the adolescent body in relation to the spaces it occupies.

In our research and our research-informed workshop facilitation, my graduate students and I strive to create conditions to notice the practices of youth broadly and deeply. For us, that commitment means attending closely to those practices that hold meaning for the young people themselves, irrespective of their currency in broader institutional discourses. It means that we must shift in our postures as researchers and educators by moving physically and theoretically closer to their sites and practices of becoming and refocusing our gaze so that we notice the richness of adolescents' multimodal play and occasionally allow our inquiries to dwell with their laughter.

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