
High School Review

Becoming Action and Future-Oriented in our Social Science Classrooms

By Chris Lewis



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As I sat down to begin writing, I stopped to reflect on the world. It is an election year, there are raging fires across the west coast, and COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc on the social and economic fabric of the United States. Cries for justice echo across communities protesting for change to protect Black individuals from discrimination and violence. The fall semester has been one of the strangest for teachers and students who log in to video chats waiting for someone to say, “You’re muted!” When we look back at 2020, we’ll remember being on lock-down, people hoarding toilet paper and hand sanitizer, cities boarded up covered in protest art, nightly cheers for nurses and doctors, and trying to find a face mask that was functional and fashionable. Or, we’ll recall the sleepless nights caused by doomsurfing

through endless pages and posts on social media and news websites (Roose, 2020). If we played a word association game and I said 2020, what words come to mind?

This is probably an unorthodox approach to beginning an article for this journal, but as you know, we are living in uncertain times. So, what would be helpful? Given the historical situation, we need our students to be action-oriented and civically engaged if we want the future to be different. What does it mean for youth to be civically engaged? Unfortunately, youth voices are often marginalized or silenced on important political and social issues because they may lack experience and maturity or they don’t have a stake in the outcomes. However, I argue youth are uniquely positioned to see and think differently. In

this article, I will describe how we can get youth more engaged in re-imagining our world. First, I will talk about the need to help students flex their civic imagination. Then I will share about youth participatory action research as a model that centers student agency. While the world feels like it is falling apart piece by piece, we need to build communities founded on hope. When we put the pieces back together, we need to do so with youth and not for them.

Youth need opportunities, in and out of schools, to participate in practical, real, and tangible efforts to change the world. However idealistic it sounds, there is a kind of utopian desire we have to embrace as we help youth exercise their civic imagination. When we encourage students to imagine without limits, they may come up with solutions that adults -or politicians- could not have thought up. Henry Giroux (2014) argued that a “radical imagination” is necessary for democracy in order for members of society to “develop the knowledge, skills, and values central to democratic forms of education, engagement, and agency.” Youth witness the successes and shortcomings of democracy; more importantly, they need to engage in democratic practices. Civic engagement is about more than knowing how the branches of the government function or keeping up with current events. In a recent article, “‘I Hesitate but I Do Have Hope’: Youth Speculative Civic Literacies for Troubled Times,” Nicole Mirra and Antero Garcia (2020) described a study where students created future-oriented projects through the National Writing Project focusing on social issues and what “could be” instead of what is (p. 317). The

authors demonstrate that youth need to speculate about the future in order for them to build real connections with what is actually happening and how they can effect change. This is especially important for youth who are part of marginalized communities because their experiences and identities are not equally represented in politics. Therefore, students need to re-imagine a world that is more inclusive and where systems of oppression have been dismantled.

As history educators, we need to work alongside students to name systems of oppression and investigate how they have developed historically before we begin to dismantle contemporary iterations. We need processes that empower students to identify the problems that affect their daily lives while also providing the spaces in which they can offer solutions. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), described with powerful examples by Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine in *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion* (2008), is a process that centers on youth voice and agency. Cammarota and Fine summarize YPAR this way:

Young people learn through research about complex power relations, histories of struggle, and the consequences of oppression. They begin to re-vision and denaturalize the realities of their social worlds and then undertake forms of collective challenge based on the knowledge garnered through their critical inquiries. (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p.2)

YPAR enacts an essential educational model that Paulo Freire (1970/2000) called

the “problem-posing” methodology. Youth would benefit from student-centered approaches that focus on inquiry instead of teacher-centered environments where youth are disempowered and often disen-

they learn about their community. Their questions and knowledge are centered and become part of the broader conversation. One challenge is creating an environment where youth are heard, not just listened

Youth Participatory Action Research Examples and Resources

Empowering the Spirit: Photovoice (<http://empoweringthespirit.ca/photovoice-project/>)

KCET Youth Voices (<https://www.kcet.org/youth-voices>)

Public Science Project (<http://publicscienceproject.org/>)

SoundOut (<https://soundout.org/>)

“The praxis of ethnic studies: Transforming second sight into critical consciousness” by Julio

Cammarota in *Race Ethnicity and Education* (2015). (<http://whereareyouquetzalcoat.com/mesofigurineproject/EthnicAndIndigenousStudiesArticles/Cammarota2015.pdf>)

YPAR Hub - UC Berkeley (<http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/>)

gaged. Freire argued, “in problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (p. 83). YPAR has the potential to help students practice being future-oriented.

There are many examples of YPAR occurring around the world being led by teachers, students, and community organizations. The end-product, determined by participants in the project, can have tremendous effects to re-shape social, economic, and political issues. However, an additional outcome is the potential self-transformation of youth who are learning about themselves as

to (Lewis, 2021; Mitra). Adults need to be willing to listen to the idea proposed by youth.

YPAR can be implemented in a variety of contexts. For example, Ethnic Studies helps students build cultural empathy and collective agency through the interrogation of racism, colonialism, and white supremacy. Students can use YPAR as a means to provide counter-narratives that resist and problematize the hegemonic narrative. Students can identify relevant problems and offer solutions that will improve the lives of those in the community. This kind of action-oriented project is essential in Ethnic Studies to help students embody and practice transformative resistance (Tolteka Cuauhtin, 2019). It is not enough to interrogate oppres-

sion and discrimination without also providing space for reflection and healing. YPAR projects can also occur in clubs and organizations. When centered on local issues, YPAR focuses on providing the community with necessary interventions and solutions. YPAR projects need an authentic audience. Proposals to school boards or city councils demonstrate the link between YPAR and civic engagement. Below is a list of websites, articles, and organizations that can help teachers support student-led YPAR projects.

Future-oriented civic engagement and YPAR hold the potential to change the way teachers and students see their work in and out of the classroom. When youth are empowered to become researchers, their knowledge and experiences are legiti-

mate. Teachers may learn to see the world through a different lens. Outside schools, youth may contribute new ideas to public policy debates and conflicts resulting from discrimination and stereotyping. People who exercise their civic imagination or participate in civic practices to make a more socially just world operate from the position of hope. I do not mean the kind of hope where you feel that things will get better. The radical hope we need is a state of being. We must think, act, and teach with the hope that with students we can re-imagine the world to be more inclusive and just. Sometimes it is hard to take this hopeful position, but when I look at what is going on in the world it is our moral imperative to work alongside and learn from our students.

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