Nicole Mirra, Danielle Filipiak, and Antero Garcia

Revolutionizing Inquiry in Urban English Classrooms: Pursuing Voice and Justice through Youth Participatory Action Research

Use only credible and reliable sources.
Include objective evidence to support your claim.
You will lose points if you do not follow MLA formatting.
Never use first-person voice.

Our mindsets changed when we were introduced to an alternative form of research that challenges traditional ideas about knowledge (who produces it, how, and for what purposes) and honors young people as authentic researchers of their own lives. It goes by the name Youth Participatory Action Research, or YPAR. It has transformed our teaching practice, and we believe that it has the potential to transform the way our profession sees our students, inquiry, and literacy itself.

Breaking Down YPAR in Theory and Practice

Informed by ideas about research that reach back decades, YPAR gained widespread attention in the field of education with the publication of two foundational texts in 2008: Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine's Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion and Jeff Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell's The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools. In their book, Cammarota and Fine describe YPAR as praxis that "provides young people with opportunities to study social problems affecting their lives and then determine actions to rectify those problems" (2).

YPAR invites young people to develop and direct research projects that feature exploration of personal experiences and often-silenced community perspectives, and to disseminate that research in a multitude of forms tailored to a variety of audiences for the purpose of advancing social justice (Bautista et al. 4). YPAR projects, whether they take place in
schools or community spaces, share a commitment to collaboration, participant knowledge, and action (McIntyre 128).

We want to make our contribution to the YPAR tradition by sharing the insights we have gained as we integrated YPAR into our literacy classrooms. We will do this by breaking YPAR down letter by letter, starting with research itself and proceeding backward toward the most important component: youth.

R: Research (Nicole’s Story)

As I spent the summer before the start of the 2012–13 school year organizing my eleventh-grade ELA curriculum, I struggled with how to align the experiences I had enjoyed the year prior while facilitating an after-school YPAR program with the hectic demands of the classroom, complete with Common Core State Standards to integrate, texts to teach, and standardized assessments on the horizon.

I made this work by organizing my curriculum thematically so that my students could take on a yearlong YPAR project of their choice that would connect to the texts I introduced in class. I had the Common Core on my side—Writing Anchor Standard #7 calls for students to “conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions” (41).

Considering that I was teaching an American Literature class, I organized my year around enduring tensions in American life that I thought would resonate with my students, many of whom recognized themselves to be marginalized in society due to their racial and socioeconomic identities. I chose some key book-length works to serve as the focal points for text sets that included poetry, songs, multimedia resources, and scholarly articles (see Table 1).

Each of these texts contained themes that encouraged students to analyze issues they cared about in their own lives and communities. At the beginning of the year, my students used LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman’s Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago (36)—a youth-written text that serves as a great exemplar of YPAR in action—as a model to take me on a tour of their community to brainstorm research topics. These explorations led each of my class periods to group themselves into teams of four or five around community challenges they wanted to explore over the course of the school year. The topics ranged from drug abuse and teen pregnancy to gang violence and student stress. All were issues that my students connected to the urban American experience and that resonated with them deeply.

I worked to weave research articles into text sets to support my students’ research—when they wondered why community problems seemed so entrenched from one generation to the next, I introduced them to theories about social reproduction and transformative resistance. When they wondered how prevalent these issues were, I introduced them to info-graphics provided by the Los Angeles Times (http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/), which they analyzed and provided counter-stories to based on their own experiences.

Each team contributed several questions regarding their research topics to a survey that we developed and distributed to the entire school. Students pored over the data, looking for patterns by gender, race, and grade level to inform their analysis. (See Figure 1 for schoolwide results from one student survey item.)

By the end of the fall semester, my students had written community tours, research questions with rationales, reviews of existing literature on their topic, and plans for collecting data.

By the end of the school year, they had interviewed family, friends, and community members; surveyed their schools; and mined their own life histories to explore their research questions.

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<th>TABLE 1. Sample Focal Text Sets</th>
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<td><strong>TENSIONS IN</strong></td>
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<td><strong>AMERICAN LIFE</strong></td>
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<td>Majority vs. Minority</td>
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My students produced reports that, based on my experience in the academy, were of equal rigor and quality as graduate-level research. They shared their findings with their classmates and me in our own version of a research conference, which featured a gallery walk that gave students the opportunity to discuss their findings. As I listened to their conversations, I thought about how YPAR had made the research experience much more humanizing and meaningful to them and to me. One student who had struggled at the beginning of the year told me, “I never thought that I could be an expert on anything or that research could be about real life.” The project helped my students see themselves as knowledge-producers with valuable ideas to share.

Research as Critical Literacy
The concept of critical literacy reminds us that literacy is not a discipline restricted to academic skill development; instead, it is a competency that connects us to other people and to society as the source of all communication and social action. As Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo put it in the title of their 1987 book, literacy involves “reading the word and the world” (1).

The YPAR process helps students learn reading and writing skills that they could gain from traditional research projects, but with an infusion of critical consciousness. For instance, students learn about how to determine if sources are credible, but instead of blindly relying on news organizations or think tanks or universities, they go deeper to analyze the ways that seemingly objective data can be manipulated based on the interests of those presenting it. Students learn about academic English, but instead of arbitrarily following its rules, they explored code-switching and how different modes of persuasion work with different audiences. It is research taken to the next level—it does not simply help students learn more about a particular topic, but also to understand the complex power dynamics inherent in the research process in today’s society.

A: Action (Danielle’s Story)
During my first few years teaching at two middle schools in Detroit, Michigan, I found ways to infuse service-learning projects into the curriculum that I was given free rein to design. Students participated in community cleanups, visited food kitchens, and designed posters to increase awareness around issues such as animal rights, domestic violence, and healthy living. However, these projects did not require them to consider in any critical manner the roots of the social issues that they attempted to address.

For the most part, I guided student transactions with the community as the teacher and ultimate authority. Agency was something I passed down to them through the sanctioning of particular activities that I labeled as acceptable “service.” I realized soon thereafter that I missed opportunities to nourish students’ sociopolitical identities and treat them as critical social and political actors in their neighborhoods.

Later, I moved up to teach high school English in the same district. During this transition, Time magazine bought a house in Detroit as part...
of a series they were reporting on about challenges facing the city. One of their first issues on the topic highlighted the work of eight individuals whom they named the “Committee to Save Detroit” (“Committee”). In a city that was at the time over 90 percent African American, only two individuals on the roster were black, and both were women. The eleventh-grade interdisciplinary team of teachers that I worked closely with saw this story and found it troublesome that the students whom we were encouraging to become leaders in their community were portrayed as invisible by popular media outlets like this one, as were their parents, neighbors, grandparents, and friends. We wanted to disrupt the script that this implied for our students.

Within the month, our eleventh-grade team designed and implemented a series of interactive lectures titled, “Who Will Save Detroit?” We integrated media coverage into these lectures, shared important events in the city’s history, discussed varying perspectives on the causes for Detroit’s economic downturn, and viewed cultural productions that documented Detroit’s struggles, including local hip-hop tracks. Our aim was two-fold: to equip students with critical media strategies to interrogate the sensationalized narratives perpetuated by media outlets, and to understand the historical origins of Detroit’s economic crisis.

From here, we asked students what they thought needed to be addressed for the city to heal and grouped them according to their interests: segregation, education, crime, blight, and media representation. Then, we tasked them with conducting research on their issues and interviewing community members. Finally, we designed a photojournalism project (see Figure 2) that required them to
visually capture their issue and generate a resource binder of lesson plans, pop culture examples, activities, and potential projects for teachers to take on if they were to educate students inside of classrooms on these issues.

Students then assembled their photos and resources onto display boards, coming together at the end of the semester for a summit we named “We Want Our City Back.” The event included community leaders and legislators with whom they could share their research and suggestions. In this work, students’ questions took center stage, and actions grew organically from the authentic concerns that they had for the state of their city. They posed viable solutions and adults took their counter-narratives seriously.

Agency and Action
Agency represents the power that derives from the pursuit of those questions that matter most to students. It is what fuels action, a central component of YPAR that allows young people to attend to and explore firsthand the nuances of issues that have a direct bearing on their lives. It is contextually bound, always in negotiation, and mediated by the histories, social interactions, and cultures that young people’s identities are entangled within. We argue that agency cannot be framed as a competency then, but as a capacity to imagine and act upon the world. Central to this is the opening of spaces for students in their plurality, spaces where they can examine their relationships with each other, with texts, and with the world.

Encounters with literacy etch upon young people’s hearts an image of themselves and their communities that they will learn to love or despise, grow with or run away from. An important midwife for emerging identities, these encounters can be a powerful force in shaping not only their social, academic, and career trajectories but also who they believe they are or might become. Thus we believe it is a moral imperative, not just an academic one, that English teachers in city schools allow students opportunities to mobilize literacy toward transformative and agentive ends (Douglass 342; Perry 11–51; Unesco 42).

In our work with students on YPAR projects, we have witnessed ways that cultivating agency can create openings for students to see themselves differently and demonstrate their academic and critical literacy skills in real-world contexts. It can help address some of intangible obstacles students in city schools face including damaged self-concept, consequences arising from a culture of hyper-standardization, and identities fettered to deficit framings of their literacies and experiences. In this way, action serves as a vehicle to transform self as well as community.

P: Participatory (Antero’s Story)
While delving deeply into local issues related to social justice with my eleventh graders during my third year of teaching in South Central Los Angeles, I felt stuck. We were spending so much time talking about resistance and identity in various texts, but not doing much more. Our texts included Luis Valdez’s play Zoot Suit, concerning the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles; Anna Deavere Smith’s documentary play, Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992, dramatizing the 1992 Los Angeles Riots; and the film A Place Called Chiapas, documenting the Zapatista movement in Mexico.

I was still growing as a teacher and was dreading just having students submit a phoned-in analytical paper at the unit’s conclusion. This was the mid-2000s, and wayward chirps and ringtones from the phones that were proliferating in our classroom punctuated our class time more and more often. As it turned out, these chirps inspired me to do something new with the digital tools that were often labeled “distractions”: in my classroom, my school, and across the country (Frey and Fisher 38).

Using the texts we were reading as models, my class pivoted from analyzing historical social movements to participating in one of our own. We decided to develop a creative work that explored an issue weighing heavily on my students’ minds—the local budget cuts affecting our school. We worked together to develop questions and students ventured into the community to begin conducting interviews with parents, friends, local business owners, and the press to learn more about budgeting and the priorities that different stakeholders had for their neighborhood public schools.

For two weeks, our class became a space of media production: phones were seen everywhere in
the classroom: some students documented the dilapidated conditions of our school with photographs; others conducted interviews via speaker phone as they scribbled notes on paper; and other students painstakingly conducted interviews through text message. This project culminated in the students writing a 60-page play, “Stop It: Our Future, A Threat,” that stressed how school budgets cuts were affecting students, staff, and the entire South Central Los Angeles community. I helped students organize several readings of the play for various community groups.

Though I didn’t know the vocabulary at the time, my students and I were enacting the kind of changes in social media use that media scholar Henry Jenkins and others argued could be part of a new culture of learning—one characterized by participation. As Jenkins et al. explained, “Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways” (8).

When I started to look, I realized that participatory culture could be seen in many literacy activities happening outside of schools. For example, the organized activism of “nerdfighters”—fans of John Green’s novels who are committed to fighting “world suck”—illustrates how participatory culture can lead to meaningful change in the real world. These spaces highlight how digital tools are making youth interactions in adult conversations about civic issues more possible than ever before, smashing any preexisting assumption that there is a barrier between the worlds of youths and adults.

We believe that it is high time for us as a teaching profession to recognize that schools are no longer isolated from the world that exists beyond our classroom walls.

Participatory Inquiry: Beyond the Academic and into the World

Schools are often treated as distinct entities that are sheltered from the conversations, social exchanges, and fun of adult life. We believe that it is high time for us as a teaching profession to recognize that schools are no longer isolated from the world that exists beyond our classroom walls.

Many students are already communicating, producing, and learning in robust contexts outside of classrooms. Their interests are driving their learning, and we think that with a little creativity, their interests can be meaningfully applied to powerful academic learning. In short, the learning students are emboldened to do outside of schools can mirror and enhance the learning opportunities we create within our classrooms through projects that authentically address real-world issues and are published in public spaces.

Recently, a group of researchers have offered a powerful framework for understanding the ways youth are learning in out-of-school contexts in today’s participatory culture. They call it “connected learning” and stress that it refers to learning opportunities that are “socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity” (Ito et al. 4). This vision of a more “connected” learning community offers us a powerful lens through which to consider how classroom inquiry can push toward real-world change around topics that youth are passionate about.

These topics can address social inequalities and link quite easily into academic learning—students using their ELA work as a means to challenge budget cuts, for instance—but they can also build from youth popular culture. While the “participatory” of YPAR does not have to be digital, we believe that the democratic possibility that comes with digital tools highlights how students must help dictate the direction of their research and the outcomes they seek.

Y: Youth—Our Call to Action

A crucial common thread runs through all of our YPAR projects: a profound commitment to flipping traditional classroom power dynamics and honoring young people not simply as adults-in-training, but as curious and critically thinking civic agents on their own terms.

We find the most revolutionary part of YPAR to be this re-envisioning of the capabilities and power of students. Once we break away from the idea that the practices of research must proceed based on the rules that govern adult-led institutions and open our minds to accepting young people as experts of their
own experiences, the classroom possibilities become endless. YPAR offers the chance for us educators to give our students more credit to tackle the issues of the day and, in the process, to make research a more generous and humanizing process.

Where to Start: Ideas for Classroom Practice

As we’ve discussed throughout this article, one of the most rewarding and meaningful aspects of YPAR as a classroom practice is its attention to differentiation; by nature, it is tailored to the needs and interests of the students in your particular classroom context. The flip side of this intensely local practice is that it is difficult to offer universal guidance about doing YPAR—no simple “how-to” instructions here. YPAR must be customized based not only on student research interests but also on the curricular demands, school priorities, and available resources. Nevertheless, we would like to share some principles that can help spark YPAR work in any classroom.

Listen patiently to your students.

Students will only develop the kind of commitment and diligence that rigorous YPAR research demands if they are deeply engaged in exploration of topics they find authentic and meaningful. Offer multiple opportunities for students to discuss their opinions on current events near to home and far away. Use these conversations to guide your planning as you introduce students to the idea of developing empirical research questions. But remember that this process takes time and trust—students whose ideas about civic issues have never been taken seriously before may not seem motivated to change the world at first. Work on building a safe space where students can talk about what they already know and what they want to know more about, and that desire for action will come.

Find curricular connections.

One of the most daunting obstacles to integrating YPAR into the classroom is time. One way to manage the crunch is to cultivate productive overlap between traditional literacy content and skills and the content and skills of students’ research. Introduce texts that tackle themes that resonate with the community issues students are exploring. Use the texts that students find and create through their research to teach standards-based reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Nicole developed a template that helps remind her to consider civic as well as academic literacy outcomes when planning her units that might be helpful (see Figure 3).

Harness community resources.

Every teacher knows that you have to do the best you can with the resources at your disposal. At a school with a wealth of technology? Perhaps your students can conduct research on the Internet in class and develop multimedia presentations. At a school without Internet access? Maybe students can use the cameras on their phones to take photographs in the community and design poster displays. In all cases, every community contains a wealth of knowledge and wisdom in the form of its citizens that can be tapped into to support student research. Don’t feel like you have to do this alone—reach out to parents, neighborhood leaders, or elected officials, and you might be surprised by the generosity you will find.

Most importantly, remember that you do not need to reinvent the wheel. YPAR does not involve completely disregarding the skills and activities involved in traditional research projects; instead, it takes those skills to the next level with an infusion of purpose and critical agency.

Works Cited


FIGURE 3. Unit Planning with Academic and Civic Outcomes

Unit Planning Template

**Essential Question(s)/Enduring Understanding(s):**

**Common Core Standard(s):**
- [ ] Reading
- [ ] Writing
- [ ] Speaking/Listening
- [ ] Language

**Civic Literacy Skill(s):**

**Connected Learning Principle(s):**

**Summative Assessment(s):**
- [ ] Real World Topics
- [ ] Civic Dialogue
- [ ] Authentic Audience
- [ ] Community Action

**Text Set:**
- [ ] Fiction (Novels, short stories, poems, drama)
- [ ] Non-Fiction (Newspaper/magazine/blog articles, speeches, informational texts)
- [ ] Multimedia (Film clips, online content, podcasts)
- [ ] Authors (Diversity of gender, race, age, country of origin, ability status, sexual orientation)

**What do students need to know and be able to do in order to successfully complete the summative assessment?**

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**Classroom Activities:** (Begin daily lesson planning on back)

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

The article describes how students can use photojournalism as part of their action research project. In this resource from ReadWriteThink.org, students explore both facts and feelings about a topic and make self–text–world connections as they prepare a presentation using word-processing and presentation software. Students select photos from websites or from ones they have taken that demonstrate their content understanding and communicate their feelings on the topic. They write and record a two-minute descriptive or persuasive script and pair the script with the photos using presentation software. Students and teacher assess the effectiveness of the presentation using the rubric and handouts provided. http://bit.ly/1Mm9Bbl

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT