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Resignifying the Negative Space: Troubling the Representation of Learning

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Abstract

Informed by the results of a collaborative project carried out with six secondary school students, this paper reflects on the methodological and epistemological issues related to the representation of informal learning practices. Borrowing a concept from the arts, I suggest that a representationalist logic in both schooling and educational research contexts can produce a *negative space*, a data site composed of practices, gestures and experiences that are rendered invisible within dominant narratives on learning. In an attempt to revisit and resignify the negative space of my fieldwork, I use Michel de Certeau's theory on tactics in an attempt to rethink youth participation. Finally, I explore how an arts-informed approach to educational ethnography can account for learning that falls outside the realm of assessment, tracing a connection between artistic modes of knowing, research practice, and the performance of learning as gesture.

Resignifying the Negative Space: Revisiting the Representation of Learning

In this paper I revisit and reflect on the results of a fieldwork experience carried out with youth in a participatory ethnography. Brought together within the framework of a national study that addressed school disaffection, during the course of an academic year a co-researcher and I met in weekly, one hour sessions with six students in their last year of compulsory education (15- and 16-year-olds). Our aim was to discuss and develop narratives about where and when the youth engage in meaningful learning, both in and outside school, in an effort to separate out the problem of school disaffection from students' interest—or ability—to learn. Thusly proposed, this ethnography presented both students and educational researchers the deceptively complex task of representing learning, specifically those informal practices that take place outside the confines of the curriculum.

Once uprooted from its association with schooling, the term learning quickly became slippery and hard to grasp. As our group struggled to develop a working lexicon to relate the idea of learning to our everyday lives, the ethnography began to reveal not just the relationship the youth have with learning, but also an implicit tension within educational research in informal contexts. This experience speaks to the fact that while research in this field has diversified and ventured outside the classroom, it still struggles with finding ways for discussing learning without falling back on normative assessment frameworks used to evaluate school effectiveness (Sefton-Green, 2013). It is this problematic of representing learning that brings me back to the fieldwork, highlighting the culminating event that unfolded during my last day at the school. On that day, the youth participants used a Prezi they designed to present the results of our project to a handful of teachers, the school administration, two local representatives from the Department of Education, and the Principal Investigator (PI) of the national project. It is noteworthy that as a representation of our learning experience throughout the project the Prezi is, for all intents and purposes, a failed account. Taking an artistic license, we may call it a *fictive rendering* (Siegesmund, 2013) of the events that took place during the ethnographic project. Faced with this difficult data, this paper attempts to grapple with this (mis)representation; it activates the idea of the *negative space* in order to pinpoint and interrogate those blank spaces in the Prezi which, through reflection, become as informative as the original content. A visual narrative accompanies this reflection to better examine how this negative space emerges through photographs and audiovisual footage recorded during the fieldwork.

Situated in the aftermath of the original presentation, this paper ultimately adopts a “palimpsest approach” (Lather, 2007, p. 478) that mines the Prezi for “the resources of its ruin” (p. 478). By reworking the ruins of the project, I confront the representational boundaries affecting this educational ethnography, questioning the limits for representing learning, and exploring how we can create spaces to recognize learning that escapes

traditional evaluation frameworks. The palimpsest, which is both object and process, provides a representational strategy capable of capturing the ontological condition of becoming learner.

Outlining the Contours of a Negative Space

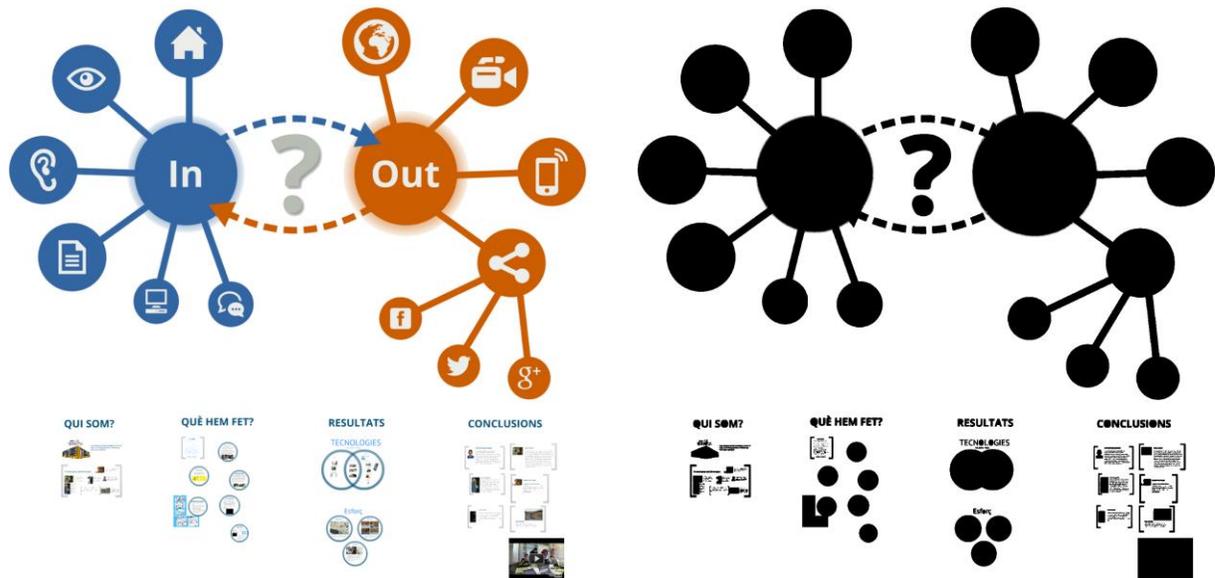


Figure 1. The Prezi and its negative space. Left: a screenshot of the Prezi. Right: a graphic produced by the author.

My analysis begins at an impasse, when I reflect on why our group project failed to give an account of our discoveries and the many experiences we shared during the project. Faced with our inability to communicate our group experience through the Prezi, I have come to see the blankness not as a lack of meaning, but rather as a signifier of the gap between what took place in this collaborative research experience and what the young people chose to represent. Drawing on a concept from the arts, I attempt to trace the contours of this negative space in order to recover those silences and blank spaces that demarcate the unsaid elements of the Prezi (Figure 1). Through this revisiting, the negative space comes to signify the relational, lived experience of the collaborative project.

Written as a heroic tale, the Prezi presents the best possible outcome of the project and glides over the obstacles, frustrations, and all the loose and untidy ends. It is this characteristic of the Prezi that most likely influenced the way it was received the day of the school presentation. Rather than interrogate the content, after watching the presentation, the teachers and administrators focused on the young people's behavior during the project. They asked about teamwork and how the youth got along rather than directing their attention to the work the

young people had done, any new ideas they had come up with, or what conclusions they had reached. I left that presentation frustrated by the events, where the school administration seemed disinterested in the youth's achievements. I have since come to reassess the role the Prezi played in the lack of dialogue. Perhaps the presentation was also at fault, guilty of telling not showing. The collaborative dynamic of our project is but briefly mentioned and the relational element, which the young people claimed to highly value, remained invisible. In this manner, the Prezi failed to capture the experiences we shared and gave no hint of how meaning was co-constructed during our time spent together. Instead, the presentation was a classic success story: a narrative that does not problematize or critique what it represents. In this light, it is not surprising that the audience was mistrustful of an account that was so clearly one-sided.

From my perspective, the Prezi was supposed to be the medium through which the young people would articulate our group project on their own terms. The result revealed the extent to which the young people were occupied with an aim that differed significantly from my own. In retrospect it is clear that when developing the Prezi the youth were not thinking about our project, per se, and were more preoccupied with the task of creating a presentation for their teachers; whereas I imagined a moment of reflection and critique, their aim was to present themselves as good students.

A Tactical Strategy of Silence

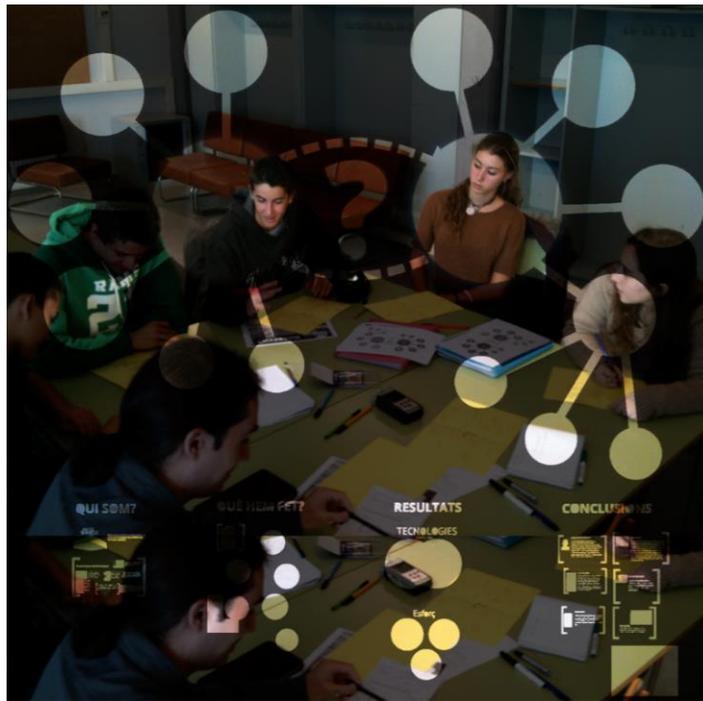


Figure 2. Rendering of the negative space of learning. Original photographs and image by the author.

If we acknowledge that the youth chose to develop a Prezi for the purpose of making a certain type of presentation—in this case, for their teachers—we may presume that the youth were working with a specific purpose, albeit one that differed from the researcher’s aims. In other words the Prezi is not a failed account, but a tactical maneuver, which illustrates the agency and objectives of the research participants. This turns the negative space of the fieldwork into a productive site; the blank spaces are no longer what is left unsaid, but an active strategy of silence.

De Certeau (1984) develops an analysis that recovers the myriad ways in which power may be upset and challenged. Dividing the universe into “producers” (agents that create, maintain, and impose disciplinary spaces) and “consumers” (agents that operate within these spaces), he describes actions that either support or subvert “the proper.” Within this environment, the tactical appropriation of disciplined social structures offers a theoretical basis for imagining the itinerant space of the learner (or, in de Certeau’s terms, *consumer*), who opposes the fixed space of the school. De Certeau introduces a permanent negotiation between the power of space and the spontaneous (and tactical) act of occupying it. His argument does not reject the potential of space to act as a dominant or normative force, yet he insists that everyday practices introduce new interpretations and meanings in any given context.

This theory is relevant for understanding the value of the subversive contribution the youth made to this participatory ethnography, and resonates with the larger project of tracking school disaffection. On one hand, de Certeau’s (1984) concept of *making do* (p. xv) resonates with how the young people approached the project objectives. A clever, resourceful behavior *making do* is a bricolage practice of making life more livable. It manifests in small moments, evidenced in the ways in which the young people appropriated and improvised within the group research project. The youth used my notes and photographs to make the Prezi. Why should they put into their own words what I had already written down? They developed the presentation by working backwards, generating content specifically for the Prezi itself—filling in the blanks—rather than thinking critically about how to represent what we had accomplished. The Prezi overall is a patchwork that strings together disparate elements—images from Google Search, my notes, photographs, quotations, and so on—in a superficial rendering that does not work too hard to make connections or ask deeper questions.

On the other hand, de Certeau (1984) also discusses *tactics*, which are a more resistant practice than *making do*, capable of subverting dominant structures, and amounting to:

a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. ... Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it ... It does not, therefore, have the option of planning, general strategy... It is a guileful ruse. (pp. 36-37)

Tactics allow us to see the youth's response to the project as negotiated, rather than haphazard. The young people rejected autoethnography, which was introduced as our methodological approach, and paid little attention to the binary 'in and outside school' that was suggested as the thematic area of inquiry. Rather than share personal narratives, the young people tested out topics and behaviors that were taboo in a regular classroom, using the project sessions to develop a general critique of the school environment and question their own subjectification as students. In other words, their participation became a guileful ruse.

Tactics, as defined by de Certeau (1984), serve to:

bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of "discipline." Pushed to their ideal limits, these procedures... compose the network of an antidiscipline. (pp. xiv-xv)

Throughout the duration of the fieldwork, a series of exchanges began to emerge that led me to catalogue a body of improvisational gestures: the tuning out, the blank response, tangents, inside jokes, and so on. These codes took over my field notes, painting a picture of a group dynamic characterized by a network of an antidiscipline, a series of actions that interrupted the project aims. While these actions felt like obstacles, ultimately they demonstrate that refusal can be generative, even productive. Tactics provide an interpretive framework that values rather than pathologizes the way young people inhabited the site of the research project (and by proxy, the space of formal education). Considering the young people as active agents who are capable of determining their role in the research project is in line with Tuck and Yang's (2014) aim when they push against "damage-focused narratives" in favor of "a desire-based framework" (p. 231). Following their lead, I wish to develop a tactical, desire-based approach to understanding the youth participation. This leads me to reconsider the Prezi in the aftermath of the final presentation.

Defining youth participation as a tactical maneuver is a deliberate attempt to expand our understanding of how students develop their learning practices inside and outside, within and against school space. If we consider how the deviant participation in the research project in many ways mimics a disaffected attitude taken up by students in the classroom, this case becomes particularly relevant. As such, it should be clear that casting the youth participation as tactical is not meant to celebrate behavior that can derail activities in the classroom merely for their deviance; the notion of tactics reads young people's actions as creative potentialities,

thus providing a way to see them as productive learning practices. To this end, reframing the youth participation as tactical acknowledges how the youth turned the research project into a process that suited their own aims and needs. What is most interesting for this reflection is the way students' tactics seem to operate on a non-representational plane, made visible only through negation: what the youth people did not speak of, did not write about, and did not document.

Performing Students-as-Researchers

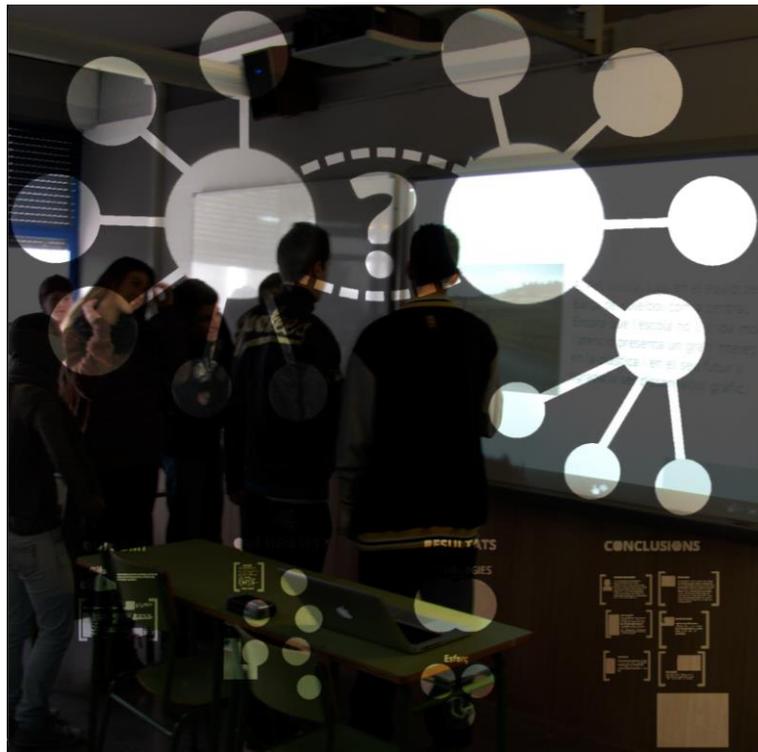


Figure 3. Rendering of the negative space of learning. Original photographs and image by the author.

Throughout the project, I held on to my desire that the Prezi could serve as the site of authentic voice, a way of capturing the students' own mark on the research project. This fantasy, wrapped up in notions of uncomplicated representational strategies, was efficiently subverted by the time the Prezi was complete. Instead of a manifestation of student voice, the Prezi amounts to a performative appropriation by the young people of the project and its aims.

In a reconfiguration of the negative connotations of sophism, de Certeau (1984) offers the following provocation:

Aristotle was already very interested in the procedures of this enemy which perverted, as he saw it, the order of truth. He quotes a formula of this protean, quick, and surprising adversary that, by making explicit the basis of sophistic, can also serve finally to define a tactic as I understand the term here: it is a matter, Corax said, of "making the worse argument seem the better". (p. 38)

If the Prezi presentation was, ultimately, a sophist argument—in that it amounted to making the work carried out by the students appear better than it was—then according to de Certeau it was also a tactic. While student voice is often cited as a justification for collaborative projects, here voice is deliberately (tactically) fictionalized by the young people themselves. Observing the creation of the Prezi, I watched as Laura wrote the individual introductions for each group member; upon reading the short biographies Laura's peers protested her impersonal, generic, first-person descriptions, but the texts were left unchanged. The session summaries Adrià drafted sound like a textbook definition of ethnographic research, a blend of Wikipedia and my own words that were apparently jotted down in his notebook from our first session. They had little to do with the process undertaken by the group. The personal evaluations that conclude the presentation were written individually, but Roser was the first to add hers to the Prezi and most of the other responses echo the key elements she highlights, offering a rather homogenous and ultimately superficial reflection on the process. In this manner, the Prezi systematically refuses to satiate my desire for the authentic contributions of the young people. By mimicking what they believed to be the 'right answer,' the young people produce a narrative that succeeds in offering a profound critique of a researcher's expectations regarding a participatory research project.

Lankshear and Knobel (2002) suggest that young learners' tactics perform, just like sophists, a "manifestation of smartness" (p. 10). This resonates with the role the Prezi played when it left our group sessions and was presented to the teachers. Based on the questions the youth received after their presentation and how they chose to answer them, one can gather that the success story produced by the young people was not a casual result, but an active decision (or deception) on their part. It is evident that by positioning themselves as researchers the youth attempted to legitimate their critique of the school and created a platform for expressing their complaints. While observing how they aggressively defended their project to their teachers, it became clear that the young people aimed to justify the time they spent missing class and present themselves as rigorous students. In this sense, the Prezi is a presentation that reproduces an academic lexicon approved by the school, but as Ellsworth (1997) describes, it captures "an ironic turn. Because it returns a difference, it has a performative dimension and force" (p. 148). The young people, rooted in an awareness of the codes they are working with and within, infused the Prezi with irony, turning it into a cynical representation by the young people of what (they presumed) the adults wanted to hear. In this context, the Prezi amounts

to a performance of students-as-researchers, one that sticks to appearances rather than actual events.

After the presentation the youth made to the teachers, I got over my frustration and got on board. *Making do* with the available video footage from our project sessions, on my own I created a short video clip that served as a blooper reel to the project (Figure 4), which was both a spoof of our “participatory ethnography” and a nod to the playful collaboration that was the foundation of our group work. This response attempted to fill in some of the gaps left by the Prezi without overwriting the work the students had done. After sharing the short clip with the youth, I began to worry about the hierarchy of researcher-produced versus student-produced work. However, my doubts were erased when upon viewing the clip the young people merely added the short film to their Prezi, unsurprisingly (and rightly) claiming it as their own.



Figure 4. Blooper reel. Video edited by the author, using video footage recorded during our project sessions. Available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpe2kXhx0uw>.

Against Representation



Figure 5. Rendering of the negative space of learning. Original photographs and image by the author.

As the fieldwork progressed, it became evident that the research project became a site for the youth to play with and within. An unanticipated (although, in retrospect, not entirely unexpected) component of my collaboration with the young people was the tension that emerged when attempting to study disaffection with teens in a participatory project. Rather than speak of their disaffection, the youth demonstrated a strong ambivalence towards our collaborative research project, which was revealed in their wary and hesitant mode of participation. In effect, disaffection was not the topic of our inquiry but it became a defining characteristic of our collaboration.

One result of this close encounter with disaffection is a glimpse of the role that student voice and representation play in how educational research approaches the topic of learning, both in and outside school. Fielding (2010), cautions:

Promotion of student engagement turns out to be about the development of essentially disciplinary devices... The entry of student voice into the previously forbidden territory of teaching and learning is neither innocent nor innocuous. In re-articulating the largely predictable list of what makes a good teacher, a

good lesson or a good school, students become unwitting agents of government control. (p. 3)

Fielding (2010) addresses a deep skepticism of the notion of voice, and the consequences and motivations of soliciting it. Rudduck and Fielding (2006) discuss what can happen when young people's voices are shared in conditions where power relations, authenticity, and inclusion are not taken into account. This, as Lankshear and Knobel (2002) also suggest, often has the effect of leading researchers to analyze the contributions as data for their own purposes, without considering the after-effects for the youth participants. As Fielding (2010) indicates, separated from lived experiences, voice can become a token, reinforcing rather than questioning the dominant narratives around schooling.

In this panorama, the disaffection the young people display can be seen in a different light. It is clear that the project was marked by a refusal on behalf of the group to speak in the terms set by the research project, even when in other moments together the young people were generous with their opinions, anecdotes, and actions. According to Tuck and Yang's (2014) portrayal of this "methodology of refusal" we can see the negation as productive, whereby "refusal is not just a 'no,' but a redirection to ideas otherwise unacknowledged or unquestioned" (p. 239). In redirecting the eyes of teachers and researchers away from themselves, the young people were tactically aware of the art of exposure and concealment. It almost appears as if the young people understood the implicit risks voiced by Tuck and Yang (2014) who caution, "some narratives die a little when contained within the metanarrative of social science... [B]eneath the intent gaze of the social scientific lens, shadow stories lose their silences, their play of meaning" (p. 235). The failed Prezi reveals that when learning is presented as an outcome instead of a process, the stories students tell die a little. They lose their playfulness by falling prey to the work of fixing meaning. This occurs within the assessment framework used in schools, and is also an outcome of the dependence on representation that pervades the social sciences.

As Garoian (2014) observes, "[r]epresentationalist thinking is at issue because assessments of teachers' and students' performances once ontologically codified, restrict and impede any emergence of unpredictability in classrooms and nullify creative modes of address" (p. 187). When it becomes clear that the relational aspect of our collaboration could not be spoken in the classroom environment, nor heard by the teachers, I observed how the students respond tactically to keep an element of their learning to themselves. In order to subvert both the expectations of the research team and the school, the Prezi remains adamantly inconclusive, indeterminate. The way in which a lack of fixed meaning renders this group project nearly inoperable reveals a crack in the research process; it suggests that there is something just

beyond the representational boundaries constructed in both education and the research that supports it; and it locates a potentiality within this negative space.

Tuck and Yang (2014) wonder if, due to the academic tendency to over-expose experiences through interpretation and representation, there are stories that “the academy doesn't deserve” (p. 232). The Prezi and the confrontational presentation of it have led to this same question. As stated, I initially experienced the Prezi and its public presentation as a series of disappointments; I felt as if the Prezi had failed to give an account of what took place in our project. In subsequent readings, I am comforted by the resilience of the young people in keeping the meaning of the project open-ended. This creates a juxtaposition between the Prezi and the project, which could be characterized using Atkinson's (2011) Deleuzian distinction between a representationalist “transcendent position towards being” versus “the potentiality and ‘unknown’ of becoming” (p. 6). During the project we continuously detoured into the unexpected, or the unknown. In a project that was always becoming, the Prezi, like the Blooper Reel, is but one contribution within a multiplicity of ways in which the fieldwork has been reworked and disseminated, in a continuous rewriting of our group experience.

Learning Under Erasure

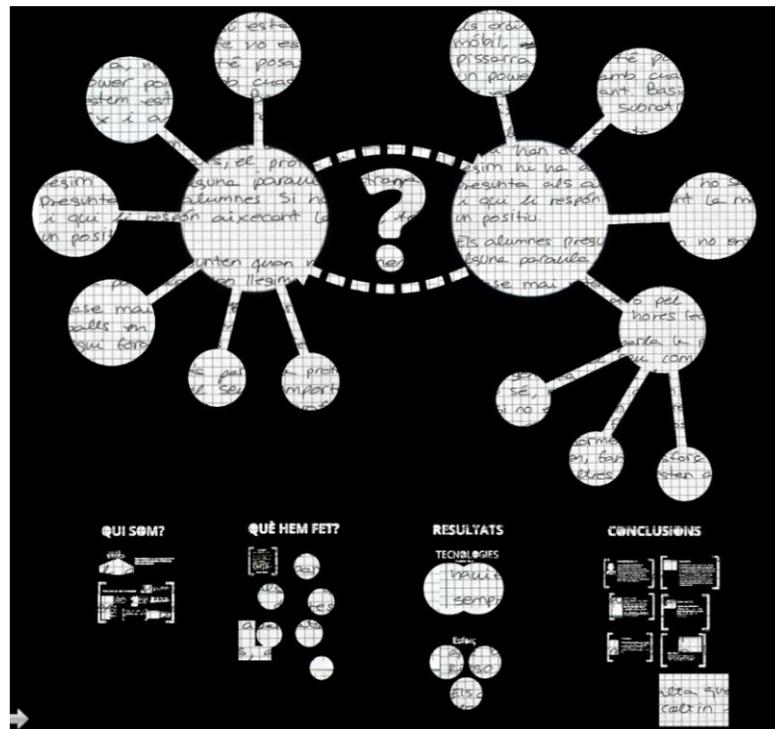


Figure 6. Rendering of the negative space of learning. Original photographs and image by the author.

The relationship between the fieldwork and its retelling occurs through sedimentation. The layering process evokes a multiplicity of meanings, which accumulate over time, and evokes a palimpsest through the looped cycle of reading-writing-deciphering. This gesture recalls the anachronistic nature of how we come to know the significant moments of our fieldwork (or classroom experiences) and questions assumptions about data, text, and the results produced within a research project. Lather (2001) uses a “palimpsest approach” as a metaphor for deconstruction. Referencing Derrida when articulating the double project of ethnographic writing, she claims that when “victory narratives are interrupted what is left is worked for the resources of its ruins” (p. 478). In the project of deconstruction, what we achieve through the writing process is a reworking of narratives in order to rewrite the world. There is no clean slate, hence the layered methodology of the palimpsest, a build-up of accumulated texts, accumulated meanings.

To conclude this paper, I will consider a final piece of “evidence” from the group project, a classroom observation written by Roser (translated from the original version in Catalan):

We use our books, we never take out our computers, we never use our cell phones, the teacher doesn't write on the blackboard, she has a PowerPoint slide on the projector showing a graph of the epoch we are studying. Basically, someone reads and we underline the text in our books.

In the classroom we are seated in pairs, and there are no class discussions. When we take turns reading aloud, if there is a strange word the teacher will ask if we know what it means, and whoever raises their hand and responds will get points...

We are never in groups in the classroom. We do some group work, but always outside school hours, on our own time.

During the class only the teacher talks, the students are quiet and well-behaved. People pay attention to the teacher, but some I don't know, they look somewhere else, as if they weren't interested.

No one laughs or makes gestures, they only underline. No one sleeps.

Some people are working, they make an effort to underline and pay attention. Others don't, they're in their own world.

We correct the homework we had... We're always assigned homework...

The students only have to do their homework, underline, listen, and pass the exams.

Roser's observation is evocative. Written almost entirely in the negative, this text troubles our understanding of what is achieved through youth *contributions* (the term contribution sounds like an addition, yet this text seems more like a subtraction). Similar to the Prezi, this observation enters into dialogue with an implicit understanding regarding what productive student practices ought to be. While not necessarily a conscious decision, this external pressure leads Roser to insist that in her class the students are well behaved, and most of them are even paying attention. On the other hand, maybe they are not—maybe they are looking somewhere else or maybe they are in their own world. It is hard to say, meaning in this case it is hard to see.

As St. Pierre and Pillow (2000) have discussed, the problem of representation is a problem that obliges us to ask, what counts as data? Indeed, what kind of data does this observation produce? More than anything, these contributions reveal a slippage between what we see, what we observe, and what we are able to know. Roser's observation informs, but the story it tells is not clear. It seems indicative of the way in which the term "learning" was difficult to pin down. The entire collaboration with the youth amounted to a shifting away from the topic through a series of tactical maneuvers. To this extent, at times it felt like the research

addressed learning under erasure. As Lather (2007) elaborates, “to work “under erasure” involves simultaneously troubling and using the concepts we think we cannot think without. It entails keeping something visible but crossed out in order to avoid universalizing or monumentalizing it” (p. 167-168).

Faced with the impossibility of representing their learning practices, the youth approached the project by maintaining the practices as visible but crossed out: enacting learning under erasure. This act of erasure is evident in how Roser observes her class. The text situates her peers—we see that class is taking place—yet the learning practices appear as a simulacrum. In spite of our attempt to document learning, in this vignette we are met merely with the hollow act of underlying, a mode of ready-made behavior that suggests studying but makes us doubt its sincerity.



Figure 7. Ann Hamilton. Photographs from the installation and performance *Tropos*. 1993. Dia Art Foundation, New York. Photography credit: Thibault Jeanson. © Ann Hamilton Studio.

To ponder this gesture, we can consider an installation by Ann Hamilton (Figure 7). In *Tropos* a solitary person sits at a desk in a large industrial space that has been covered in hair. While seated, this figure uses a small wood burning tool to methodically erase the texts after reading them; the words become smoke and the page is modified, imperfectly cleared, awaiting another intervention. This action suggests the making of a palimpsest and reminds us of the cyclical relationship between reading, interpreting, and writing. Thinking methodologically, the palimpsest is a provocation, recalling the way meaning emerges, is altered, leaves a trace, and disappears. Deconstruction has been accused of nihilist tendencies, but working under erasure is not a process of removing anything. Concepts do not disappear, their meaning simply becomes less self-evident. *Tropos* helps us imagine this feat because the burnt words do not signify a loss. Rather, “the smoke itself is part of the language of remaking, ‘for the transformation of the text—printed word—to smoke is reabsorbed as smell by the hair, the floor; thus word is again materialized’” (Simon, 2006, p. 113). The gesture of burning in *Tropos* suggests the act of working under erasure where the encounter with the text provokes a transformation, turning it into more than words on a page. This is echoed in the group project; when the meaning of the term learning went up in smoke, once extracted from school, research, and life experience. Yet, it did not disappear. Undergoing a qualitative shift, learning remained a concept the project could not think without.

Over the course of the project, I observed that for the youth the material flow of learning often exceeded representational boundaries. Given the way the young people responded to the research prompt, it sometimes felt like they were creating a smokescreen. However, this opaque vision allowed us to experience the concept of learning differently. At the whim of the young people’s tactical maneuvering I was less certain but more open to surprise. I found that the Prezi, as a fictionalization, still managed to contribute to the research project. Thus, while the day of the presentation it felt as if the young people had taken the project and burned it down, in retrospect I consider that they were, in fact, contributing to the language of remaking.

Learning as Gesture



Figure 8. Rendering of the negative space of learning. Original photographs and image by the author.

Thus far I have situated this reflection in the negative space, using it as a site for questioning student voice and the representation of learning in educational research. The stories told by the young people throughout the project—one woven through the ongoing inquiry that unfolded during our time together, and the other, different story represented in the Prezi—are noteworthy for “refusing to settle” (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 140) the understanding about their learning experiences. In this environment, it is productive to consider Ellsworth’s (1997) description of modes of address, which rephrases the understanding of voice in terms of response. A response implies a different type of agency that is not dependent on a researcher’s ability to empower young people, recognizing instead the self-empowered decisions initiated by those who choose to respond. This becomes evident during the last day of the fieldwork when the young people presented the project to their teachers and the school principal. Here we witness a response so calculated and so at odds with the day-to-day life of the project that it read as a performative interpretation of students as researchers.

Revisiting the Prezi reveals how learners negotiated spaces of formal education through the “weak art” of tactical interventions (de Certeau, 1984). Through their deflection of the

research question and their subversive response to the research aims, the youth came to inhabit the space of inquiry differently. In this manner, we can observe that a so-called pedagogy of tactics is useful for considering how youth make educational spaces more inhabitable. Building on disruptive practices, the participatory project can be seen as an eventful space that does not fix an experience but multiplies it.

In this performative turn, the question of *what youth learned* shifts to *how does learning take place?* This shift frames learning as a gesture rather than an achievement (or objective). Ellsworth (1997) observes “gestures act performatively, rather than representationally, and resituate the events of places... within a different structure of relations” (p. 146). The learning gesture not only acknowledges the performative aspect of the students’ transition through the project, but it also hints at why their learning was regulated to those interstitial, non-representational spaces. Following Agamben (2000), a gesture is a means without an end: “[w]hat characterizes the gesture is that nothing is being produced or acted, rather something is being endured or supported” (p. 57). Envisioning the enduring action of learning as a sketch, as a gesture that is forever unfinished, is a challenge that asks us to situate our interventions in the field of educational research within the negative space of becoming-learners.

This gesture recalls the process of the palimpsest and the anachronistic nature of how we come to know things, how we create meaning, or simply how we learn. The implication is not that knowledge cannot be fixed but that any understanding that is reached is always only one layer among others. Keeping meaning in play through multiple reiterations of the fieldwork—including and extending beyond the Prezi—can be a way to allow learning in this project to emerge as a continuous action, a gesture that is endured and supported, in other words, a potentiality that has yet to be actualized (Atkinson, 2011).

In conclusion, by reflecting on what the Prezi both concealed and revealed, then and now, we can interpret youth participation in this collaborative project as an engagement with a tactical representation of learning. Resisting the representational logic of education and research, we discover through the young people’s disaffected reaction to the project different ways of recovering those learning practices that are rendered invisible within formal education. By reconfiguring the negative space as a potentiality, we can trouble the so-called social imaginary of learning. This is achieved by not over-signifying the range of practices that youth engage in, and by allowing their gestures to emerge and disappear, enduring and leaving a trace, creating a palimpsest that is both less and more than a representation.

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Rachel Fendler is assistant professor of art education at the Florida State University. Her research areas include youth visual culture, informal learning and educational ethnography. Her publications are informed by post-structural theory and arts-informed methodologies and explore ways of intervening in the social imaginary of learning.

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