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Disrupting Discourses Digitally for LGBTQ Rights

MINDI RHOADES

ABSTRACT

Current dominant discourses maintain an anti-LGBTQ bias that contributes to and reinforces the continued denial of full, equal LGBTQ rights. Educational environments can exacerbate this denial, to the point of implicitly sanctioning harassment and physical human rights abuses. While digital media can infinitely reproduce and replicate these discriminatory discourses, they also offer virtual spaces and possibilities for collective, community, arts-based actions/responses to disrupt, and change, them (Desai & Chalmers, 2007). Sandoval and Latorre's (2008) activism, Blackburn's (2002) liberatory literacy performances, and Richardson's (2010) interventionist art provide a useful framework for considering, engaging, and challenging contemporary LGBTQ discourses. Their work provides a context for examining hateful/negative, positive/celebratory, and more complicated, conflicted examples of LGBTQ cultural discourses circulating currently. Liberatory discourse attempts are necessary, but these can encounter complex, shifting factors able to co-opt, negate, or neutralize their messages. Art education can help students use new technologies and media to identify such complexities, recognize possibilities, and work for equity.

TENSIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

This moment in America (re)presents multiple, often conflicting, messages around sexual identities and social justice. In fall of 2010, American media focused attention on a tragic series of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ¹) youth suicides. Badash (2010) reports up to 11 anti-gay, hate-related teen suicides in September 2010 alone. At least three of them endured documented relentless bullying at school about being gay *despite repeated student and parent complaints* (Dottinga & Mundell, 2010). An 18-year-old Rutgers student, unknowingly had his sexual encounter with another male streamed online live (Friedman, 2010). A Black gay youth activist "could not bear the burden of living as a gay man of color in a world grown cold and hateful to those of us who live and love differently than the so-called 'social mainstream'" (Barker, 2010). Meanwhile, openly gay Ellen DeGeneres' television show maintains a top-25 rating, with 12 *Daytime Emmys* in its 7-year run (Seidman, 2010). *Don't Ask, Don't Tell*, the 17-year old United States' military policy banning homosexuals

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I use "LGBTQ," "gay," and "homosexual" as interchangeable, deferring to source material or speakers' word choices when appropriate, without interrogating the problems inherent in the terms and their use as labels.

and bisexuals was repealed by the House, Senate, and President Obama, and now awaits its official end (Stolberg, 2010). Progress is uneven.

Popular discourses exemplify dissonances, too. McCullough (2010), of *Christian Newswire*, insists Ellen DeGeneres caused *American Idol*'s significant ratings decline because activist homosexuals drive audience members away. Darren Franich (2010) of popwatch counters that last season's biggest television hits included *Glee*, "a whirling candy-colored hurricane of homosexuality;" *Modern Family*, featuring married gay adoptive dads; and *Dancing With The Stars*, a festival of "wearing sequins, dancing, and wearing sequins" (para. 5). Meanwhile, regular scandals involving high-profile, outspoken homophobic ministers occur, with men like George Rekers, Ted Haggard, Bishop Eddie Long, Paul Crouch, and John Geoghan caught or reported engaging in the homosexual activities and lifestyle they condemn (Gane-McCalla, 2010). They embody our current contradictory cultural messages and impulses, demonstrating the difficulty of maintaining LGBTQ inequities.

Such dissonance reveals a disparity wherein LGBTQ people lack full rights while culture capitalizes on, appropriates, and vicariously enjoys their work, creativity, and talent. It directly conflicts with the United Nation's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*' (1948) unequivocal assertion of the "equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family," with "equal protection against any discrimination," and entitlement to equal freedoms. This includes LGBTQ people. While internationally ratified, the declaration is not legally-binding. Many countries—like the United States, Italy, and France—continue denying LGBTQ people full equal rights. Others—like Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Iran—maintain the death penalty as punishment for homosexuality. And in between, many countries, like Egypt, still criminalize and punish, to varying degrees, being LGBTQ (Ottoson, 2010). Recognizing full human rights for LGBTQ people "remains a deeply political and contentious struggle" (Mihir & Schmitz, 2007, p. 973). In the United States, current socio-cultural turmoil fuels a "toxic environment" of increasing mental, emotional, political, and physical assaults against LGBTQ people and other marginalized populations (Rich, 2010). Such intolerance and hostility prevents full protection against discrimination.

Facing constant discrimination and marginalization can damage LGBTQ people in various ways, including destroying self-esteem, and precipitating self-defeat and self-destructive thoughts and behaviors. Unfortunately, schools often amplify such socio-cultural forces and discourses (Desai & Chalmers, 2007). As a result, many art educators advocate more equitable pedagogies, practices, and educational discourses around contemporary, relevant social justice issues that engage students in examining, addressing, and countering social injustices

(Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Bastos, 2010; Darts, 2004; Desai & Chalmers, 2007; Garber, 2004). To do this, art education can synthesize and adapt social justice youth development models (Ginwright & Cammerota, 2002; Sandoval & Latorre, 2008), critical liberatory literacy concepts (Blackburn, 2002; Lankshear 1997), and interventionist art strategies (Richardson, 2010). Arts can enable activist responses. The prevalence, relative accessibility, and manipulability of digital media, in particular, provide prime reasons for its draw and growing popularity.

Digital media affords virtual spaces for community-based, arts-based efforts for change (Desai & Chalmers, 2007). Student-artists recognize combining "art, activism, and community" can produce "a political act," (Sandoval & Latorre, 2008, p. 101), and digital media can facilitate it. LGBTQ activists are using digital media technology to disrupt, displace, and replace dominant homophobic discourses with newer, more equitable ones. Sandoval & Latorre's (2008) *artivism*, Blackburn's (2002) liberatory literacy performances, and Richardson's (2010) ideas around interventionist art provide frameworks for analyzing digital LGBTQ discourses ranging from homophobic and socially restrictive, to accepting and just, to those that are more complicated. After briefly defining these frameworks, I will apply them to a number of cases of contemporary digital LGBTQ discourses. Under consideration will be examples that perpetuate discrimination and oppression; attempts to challenge, disrupt, and change them; and the complications liberatory discourse attempts can encounter.

DOMINANT SOCIO-CULTURAL DISCOURSES AND ART EDUCATION POSSIBILITIES

We all participate in social justice inequities inscribed in dominant cultural discourses. Sometimes these seemingly insignificant inequities contribute to severe consequences, like LGBTQ youth suicides. Whether the recent spate of suicides was average or an anomaly (Savage, 2010b; Savin-Williams in Levy, 2010), it captured a suddenly more sympathetic public's attention, forced the recognition of contributing socio-cultural beliefs, and initiated public discussions of possible solutions through personal and collective change (Ginwright & Cammerota, 2002). LGBTQ discourses can shift during moments like these, when public cultural producers—artists, educators, writers, activists, celebrities, politicians—contest and counter the status quo, eventually displacing discriminatory discourses with more equitable ones.

Regardless of the relative pop culture success of LGBTQ characters, performers, artists, aesthetic sensibilities, and themes, dominant cultural discourse in the U.S. deems heterosexuality the norm and other sexual identities abnormal, deviant, sinful, and somehow dangerously communicable. Hatred and homophobia infest school cultures when “fag” is the choice male insult. They slither through our cultural subconscious when people hollowly claim calling something dislikable “gay” is meaningless. They percolate in pop culture’s attempts to profit by pandering to and perpetuating common stereotypes at minorities’ expense. Dominant cultural discourses continue to dehumanize, deny rights to, and foster discrimination and violence against LGBTQ people.

American news and social interaction has become increasingly digital (Pew Research Council, 2008). This has benefits and drawbacks for LGBTQ populations. While the Internet facilitates connections among LGBTQ persons, it also provides a new forum for fostering and inflaming anti-LGBTQ sentiment. The anonymity of interactions online can encourage extremist views, comments, and behaviors.

Religious figures and organizations are particularly egregious in promoting discrimination against LGBTQ people. Recently, this discrimination has focused on the continued denial of gay marriage rights, a symbol of LGBTQ equality. In November, 2009, over 150 Christian clergy released the *Manhattan Declaration: A Call of Christian Conscience*, decrying gay marriage rights, and legislation qualifying sexual orientation and gender identity as protected categories for federal hate crimes and the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (Chusid, 2009). Contemporary churches and leaders have taken more direct, specific anti-gay actions. Notably, the Mormon Church, based in and operating from Utah, and representing less than 2% of Californians, effectively “hijacked” California’s gay marriage campaign, defeating Proposition 8, which would have legalized gay marriage statewide. Fred Karger of *Californians Against Hate* notes Mormons raised “a staggering amount of money and an even more staggering percentage of the overall campaign receipts,” raising “an estimated 77% of total donations” for defeating it (Garcia, 2008). In addition to their flood of cash, the Mormon leadership used digital media and means to produce and distribute almost 30 commercials, establish a web site, urging financial donations and weekly volunteering. The Church used younger members to deploy new media technologies to communicate their message, and organize events, and recruit volunteers (Garcia, 2008). Primarily as a result of the successful campaign tactics of this fringe religious minority, centered outside California and representing very few Californians, gay Californians are denied marriage rights.

As Rich (2010) asserts, America’s radical right has an increasingly unfocused anger “likely to claim minorities like gays ... as collateral damage” (para. 6). For example, Byron Williams, abstractly angry at Congress and left-wing pro-homosexual agendas, targeted vaguely LGBTQ-related organizations like the ACLU and the Tides Foundation, an obscure AIDS education/prevention nonprofit, mentioned repeatedly by right-wing talk radio host Glenn Beck. Dana Milbank of the *Washington Post* concedes, “it’s not fair to blame Beck for violence committed by his fans,” but he should “stop encouraging extremists” (para. 10). The hateful message of these anti-LGBTQ discourses is clear: LGBTQ people do not have the same rights, and are not fully equal to heterosexuals. While digital media facilitate these discourses, their consequences do not remain digital.

In fact, LGBTQ people nationwide are as, or more, susceptible “to hate violence now as they were a decade ago” (Elegon, 2010). A recent incident in the Bronx involved at least 9 assailants kidnapping three victims—a 30-year-old gay man, popular in the neighborhood, and two younger men who apparently had sexual relations with him. They were beaten, stripped, burned with cigarettes, cut with a box cutter, and the gay man was sodomized with a wooden plunger handle (Wilson & Baker, 2010). In Chelsea, a gay enclave, six men verbally harassed a group of gay men, and hit them with a metal garbage can. And in Greenwich Village, at the Stonewall Inn, a landmark of the gay right’s movement, two men gay-bashed a patron in the bathroom (Lohr, 2010). These examples clearly illustrate a lack of safe places for LGBTQ individuals.

Within the compulsory U.S. educational system, LGBTQ youth often have few options to avoid overt school-based versions of this homophobia: bullying and hate crimes. Administrators, teachers, and counselors have been remiss in the ways they address the harassment of LGBTQ students, often exacerbating problems rather than relieving them. Many prefer blaming LGBTQ victims for bringing violence upon themselves, accepting bullying as a rite of passage, and believing it might just disappear; many *do nothing*, even when students and parents complain (Jones, 2010). Teachers can face many obstacles and threats in supporting LGBTQ youth or issues, including harassment, exclusion, and administrative sanctions (Smith, 2010). Without clear advocates or a climate of acceptance, LGBTQ youth who can “pass” as straight often will, to retain heterosexual rights and privileges, despite their inner turmoil and dissatisfaction (Blackburn, 2002). Those who can’t often confront increasingly hostile educational environments where homophobic/heterosexist discourses ceaselessly reify themselves, spewing constant negative messages about LGBTQ people.

Anti-LGBTQ discourses manifest in school in multiple ways. A 30-second YouTube video shows an October 2010 football game between two Cleveland high schools in which a large group of students taunted the opposing team,

chanting "Powder Blue Faggots! Powder Blue Faggots!" Reportedly opposing team fans retorted, "Halloween Homos!" The principal of the school relayed displeasure, but declined disciplinary action because she "didn't see what good would come from suspending about 300 students" (Sams, 2010). According to Jan Cline, executive director of the LGBT Center of Greater Cleveland, such widespread participation, digital distribution, and administrative inaction "tells people it's OK to say anti-gay slurs because those people are not worth very much," and this contributes to LGBTQ youth suicides (joemygod.blogspot.com). Digital technology also allowed a Rutgers University student to secretly stream his roommate's same-sex encounter live online; the publicly outed roommate committed suicide, jumping from the George Washington bridge (Friedman, 2010). Even for documented infractions, negative consequences remain elusive, legal ramifications unclear, but the causes and targets are familiar.

Continuing to deny LGBTQ people full rights or equal protections fosters a culture that condones the discrimination, hate, and violence LGBTQ people encounter. Increasingly online pundit Dan Savage (2010a) argues the same-sex marriage rights debate demonstrates how religions/religious leaders promote hateful discourses dedicated to devaluing, dehumanizing, and scapegoating LGBTQ people, denying their full equal rights, often politely couching them as about religion/tradition or nature/morality. These discourses of inequity and hate are indefensible.

Positive Media Discourses

Dominant discourses and media scramble to control, contain, and define the terms of LGBTQ equality. LGBTQ activists/supporters are using technology to challenge, and change, these terms. While the Internet is not yet universally accessible, it enables much more democratic access to the means of cultural consumption, organization, production, and distribution (Padovani, Musiani, & Pavan, 2010). Digital media offer means for establishing and maintaining LGBTQ-positive presences/discourses and communication. During the recent suicides, mainstream media highlighted the existence of pro-LGBTQ organizations, many with strong online presences. For example, the Trevor Project is a national crisis intervention and suicide prevention organization with a 24-hour toll free "lifeline" for LGBTQ youth that offers educational materials/resources and in-school workshops. Other online-accessible examples include Parents Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the Safe Schools Coalition, and The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN).

PFLAG and GLSEN collaboratively launched "Claim Your Rights," a "historical effort to empower students and their allies to report incidences of

bullying, harassment, or discrimination to the Office for Civil Rights at the U.S. Education Department" ("Claim your rights," 2010). Jody Huckaby, PFLAG National Executive Director, asserts:

When students and teachers, parents and allies make reports of bullying, harassment, or discrimination directly to the Education Department, they are building a record that will confirm what we know through research and personal narratives alike: bullying and harassment is widespread, pervasive, destructive, and must be addressed. ("Claim your rights," 2010)

Data collected from these reports could finally prompt formal pressure for school change.

While these well-organized, professional efforts represent LGBTQ-rights progress, perseverance, and plans, digital technology and media can provide/create newer spaces for challenging and changing dominant discriminatory discourses. During the suicide crisis, digital media catalyzed grassroots activism, and react-ivism, too. Brittany McMillam, a Canadian high school student, proposed in her blog that October 20, 2010 be *Wear Purple Spirit Day* to honor the LGBTQ youth who committed suicide and to show support to other LGBTQ youth facing homophobia, harassment, and abuse (Wackrow, 2010). Her idea went viral, spawning a national cultural phenomenon. The Human Rights Campaign, MTV, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD) joined and promoted the cause. Celebrities appeared on television and in person wearing purple, and students nationwide participated too.

Dominant homophobic discourses reacted with vengeance. Conservative bloggers criticized news outlets like CNN for providing coverage and promoting the gay agenda (Balan, 2010). Pundits debated the actual severity and significance of gay youth suicides (Easterbrook, 2010). And an Arkansas School Board member commented on Facebook:

The only way im wearin [sic] [purple] is if they all commit suicide... It pisses me off...that we make special purple fag day for them. I like that fags can't procreate. I also enjoy the fact that they often give each other AIDS and die. (as cited in Broverman, 2010)

Technology provided a broader, and he believed safe, audience for his bigotry. But public expression of such dominant discourses was suddenly no longer acceptable. The evidence was digitally indelible; he resigned promptly from the board.

Additional online collective advocacy efforts appropriate commercial formats. The Ad Council, with GLSEN, created a public service announcement featuring out African American comedian Wanda Sykes confronting a white male teenager using "That's gay!" She interrupts an all-male trio's laughter with,

“Don’t say that something is gay when you mean that something is dumb or stupid.” She, illustratively, calls a pepper shaker “so sixteen-year-old boy with a cheesy moustache!” She concludes, “When you say *that’s so gay*, do you realize what you say? Knock it off!” (GLSEN & The Ad Council, 2010). The *Give a Damn Campaign* (Lauper, 2011) aims to mobilize primarily straight allies to learn more about LGBTQ issues, support LGBTQ people, and get involved in the fight for LGBTQ rights and acceptance. The website includes resources and encourages visitors to join the campaign, tell and post their own stories, and access educational/activist resources on LGBTQ issues. The *Give a Damn Campaign* has enlisted many celebrities – LGBTQ and straight – to talk about LGBTQ issues they “give a damn” about and why, including Cyndi Lauper, Whoopi Goldberg, Jason Mraz, Anna Paquin, Judith Light, Cher, Elton John, and Clay Aiken. While some of these public service announcement videos have appeared in mainstream media venues, they find a larger audience, and a longer life, online.

FCKH8 is another recent digitally-based effort to counteract homophobic discourses. FCKH8 challenges Californians to reverse the defeat of Proposition 8. The FCKH8 campaign is distinctly aggressive, deliberately deploying traditionally-censored language and imagery. Their commercial on FCKH8.com presents a diverse array of people insisting we “Fuck Hate” en masse. In it a mom tells people to “Quit fucking with my gay son’s rights.” An adolescent girl says, “Don’t fuck with my queer daddies!” A boy declares, “Don’t fuck with my two moms!” Adults comment, “If you’re against gay marriage, then don’t marry someone with the same fucking junk in their undies as you!” “Don’t fuck with our families!” Everyone then implores, “Fuck Hate!” Luke Montgomery, the campaign’s creator responded to criticisms that their use of “foul language,” particularly by children, damages their goals:

Prop 8 was school bullies all grown up at the ballot box trying to hurt us and our families... On the F-word being offensive... I think it’s a very mild response to the brutal attacks on our rights at the ballot box... We are using an impolite word in response to people who are taking away our rights to visit our spouses in the hospital, to adopting our children, and having healthcare benefits. I hope that puts a YouTube video and T-shirt into perspective. (Montgomery, 2010)

Digital media enables the FCKH8 campaigners to disrupt the demure, polite, distanced discourse required of LGBTQ activists in many mainstream media outlets. Here, diverse participants voice palpable fury, presenting a complicated, personalized picture of people impacted by the denial of full LGBTQ rights.

it gets better

A current prominent disruptive digital discourse is the *it gets better project*. Advice columnist/political pundit Dan Savage names and disrupts LGBTQ-oppressive discourses. Savage offers re-statements and re-performances of discriminatory discourses, exposing their fear and hatred, and advocating more inclusive and equitable options (Butler, 1990, 1997; Blackburn, 2002). Savage’s multimedia presence and resources position him, as a cultural producer, to publically criticize bigoted, discriminatory forces.

He is especially concerned with hypocritical Christians’ hate, and its harmful consequences for LGBTQ people. After Savage spoke on National Public Radio (NPR), a reader/listener wrote in to his column “Savage Love” complaining that he maligned and misrepresented Christians as anti-gay. The reader described herself as “someone who loves the Lord and does not support gay marriage,” but feels “heartbroken” about the recent gay youth suicides, and offended that Savage intimated “faithful Christians...would somehow encourage their children to mock, hurt, or intimidate another person” (2010a). Savage counters:

children of people who see gay people as sinful or damaged or disordered and unworthy of full civil equality—even if those people strive to express their bigotry in the politest possible way...learn to see gay people as sinful, damaged, disordered, and unworthy. (para. 8)

He continues that when “faithful Christians” spout “dehumanizing bigotries” and lies, it gives “straight children a license to verbally abuse, humiliate, and condemn the gay children they encounter at school...to feel justified in physically attacking [them]” (para. 10). He explains this abuse needs no explicit encouragement, “the encouragement—along with your hatred and fear—is implicit...and we can see the fruits of it” (para. 10). Savage insists the combination of continual harassment, the accumulation of attempts to withhold LGBTQ full civil rights, and messages telling LGBTQ people “they’re not valued, that their lives are not worth living...fill your straight children with hate” and “fill your gay children with suicidal despair” (para. 11). The injustices perpetuated by this homophobia and hatred harm LGBTQ people, but they harm straight people, too.

The suicide of Billy Lucas, a bullied teen in Greensburg, Indiana, moved Savage to action. He confesses, “I wish I could have talked to this kid for five minutes...I wish I could have told him that, however bad things were, however isolated and alone he was, it gets better” (2010b, para. 13). Savage notes:

But gay adults aren’t allowed to talk to these kids. Schools and churches don’t bring us in to talk to teenagers who are being bullied. Many of these kids have homophobic parents who believe that they can prevent their gay children from growing up to be gay—or from ever coming

out—by depriving them of information, resources, and positive role models. (2010b, para. 15)

So Savage wondered, “Why are we waiting for permission to talk to these kids? We have the ability to talk directly to them right now. We don’t have to wait for permission to let them know that *it gets better*.” He created a YouTube channel, www.itgetsbetter.com, to host videos of people telling LGBTQ youth *it gets better*. He states:

Today we have the power to give these kids hope. We have the tools to reach out to them and tell our stories and let them know that it *does* get better... many LGBT youth can’t picture what their lives might be like as openly gay adults. They can’t imagine a future for themselves. So let’s show them what our lives are like, let’s show them what the future may hold in store for them. (2010b, para. 20)

He posted a simple video, sitting with his husband Terry, talking about wonderful people, things, and experiences in their lives, including a middle-of-the-night stroll with his young son in Paris. Savage encouraged other LGBTQ adults to submit videos telling youth it gets better. Echoing Harvey Milk’s famous comments, Savage insists we have to give them hope.

Within a few days of Savage establishing the website and posting his video, submissions poured in. LGBTQ celebrities posted their stories and encouragement. Tim Gunn, from *Project Runway*, immediately shared his coming out struggles, failed suicide attempt, and how happy he is now. Politicians including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, President Obama, and the Democratic National Committee contributed. At a local level, Fort Worth town councilman Joel Burns, outed himself at a public meeting, through tears, sharing his story of suffering, silence, and attempted suicide. He praised his family’s change to acceptance. He implored LGBTQ youth, “Please stick around to make those happy memories for yourself” (Burns, 2010).

Religious leaders and congregations, youth groups, student groups, and employee groups have posted positive videos. Many videos are in sign language, some subtitled.

Many of these videos speak directly to youth. A mother tells them if their parents aren’t accepting, they have to find themselves a new family. Not to worry about detractors because their only responsibility is to “be who you are and to make the world more beautiful.” Many contributors provide their names and personal contact information for LGBTQ youth in need of support. Several videos speak directly to parents of LGBTQ youth. One youth tells parents, “Even if your religion doesn’t agree with it or your own thoughts or you don’t know, remember, it’s your kid, and you love them, right? It gets better for you, too.” Several LGBTQ choruses posted performances of inspirational songs,

sung by people of all ages, genders, sexual identities, ethnicities, colors, shapes, and sizes. In one, as a gay choir sings, a congregation floods in joining them. The Chicago Gay Men’s Chorus sings “It Gets Better” in rounds, with the text “This is what our voices are for” scrolling by at the end. Several confront bullies harassing LGBTQ people. One man addresses bullies’ lack of self-confidence and the consequence their hate will have in their lives when he says, “Your life is probably going to get pretty miserable and shitty from here on in, and you deserve it, and fuck you!” Postings still stream in. Savage has instigated a space where marginalized voices contradict mainstream ones, where LGBTQ people represent themselves, telling their own stories and showing alternative possibilities for LGBTQ youth who primarily see isolation and despair. These and other LGBTQ discourses using *artivism*, liberatory literacy performances, and interventionist art often have more complicated aspects, as the following section will discuss.

ANALYSIS

Community-based, collaborative, digital discourses demonstrate the potential of combining *artivism* with liberatory identity performances and interventionist strategies to produce possibilities, hopes, and images of LGBTQ equality. Art education concerned with contemporary visual culture, media, and socio-cultural inequities can provide venues for critical engagement and interaction with such socio-cultural issues/discourses. Combining concepts from *artivism* (Sandoval & Latorre, 2008), liberatory literacy performances (Blackburn, 2002), and interventionist art practices (Richardson, 2010) provides art education pedagogical potential. Collectively, these concepts can contribute to framing critical, arts-based engagement with dominant discriminatory discourses.

Artivism

Digital *artivism* is the convergence of activism and digital artistic production by people “who see an organic relationship between [them]” (Sandoval & Latorre, 2008, p. 81). *Artivists* are “committed to transforming themselves and the world,” fully cognizant of “digital media’s liberatory potential as well as its persisting exclusions” (p. 83). We see evidence of *artivism* in the presence and responses of pro-LGBTQ *artivistic* digital media use (Sandoval & Latorre, 2008). The online *We Give a Damn Campaign* combines mainstream commercial media and the personal video to present digital stories of marginalized perspectives to promote cultural change. Dan Savage’s *it gets better project* demonstrates how the simple act of sharing personal coming out stories, positive memories, and experiences can be an artistic and a political act. In less than two weeks, Savage prompted thousands of people to become *artivists*, creating and compiling an exponentially

increasing resource. Savage recognized digital technology's power for connecting and building community across previous chasms, the "unprecedented means" for representation outside more policed and controlled environments as well as officially sanctioned communication channels, disrupting dominant discourses and establishing "sites of healing" and "counterhegemonic alliances with other[s]" (Sandoval & Latorre, 2008, p. 90). He opened a space to create change.

FCKH8.com uses digital, arts-based means to sell an ostensibly equal rights agenda. Here, LGBTQ equality involves gay marriage rights and defeating Prop 8. But does their work really constitute *artivism*? Proponents of gay rights, including marriage, often argue that gaining full LGBTQ rights necessitates "integrat[ing] into current normative frameworks" and aligning with "broader human rights" efforts to counteract deeply ingrained, religiously-based biases (Padovani, Musiani, & Pavan, 2010, p. 361). Other scholars/activists insist gay marriage distracts from true issues of equality, reinscribing a foundational patriarchal institution and its discriminatory practices and extending rights to a new select few willing to adopt a heterosexist marriage paradigm (queerkidssaynomarriage, 2009). The LGBTQ community faces longstanding debates over internally marginalizing/sacrificing multiple minority populations—transgender, women, queer, racial and ethnic minorities, the poor/working class, the flamboyant or butch, etc. (McFarland, 2004). Online, queer activists argue efforts should focus on economic, racial, gender, ability, citizenship, educational, and political equality instead of fighting to adopt an inequitable institutionalized norm (queerkidssaynomarriage, 2009). FCKH8 ignores these larger problems of marriage inequality in their effort to gain equal rights for some gay people.

FCKH8 appropriates traditional design and marketing media tactics to demand gay marriage rights. They promote their line of t-shirts and merchandise as a way to support, and fund, this struggle. These efforts converge at a convoluted intersection of activism, media, politics, and profit. While components of their campaign are activist-based, the capitalist component is undeniable. In fact, a drawback to primarily online *artivism* is digital media's tendency to facilitate an increasingly rapid co-optation and transformation of activist movements:

into institutionalized organizations that simplify complex issues to sound bites, slogans, and campaigns as a means to rapidly raise awareness; then, self-preservation, maintaining "market share," and economic growth traditionally become an organization's driving force.

(Mihir & Schmitz, 2007, p. 986)

In the case of FCKH8.com, collective political action commingles messily with capitalist tactics. Does selling t-shirts achieve human rights? Given the financial power of (religious) organizations, as exhibited in the Mormon Church's role

defeating Proposition 8, can human rights efforts, even *artivist* ones, compete without capitalism's tools? How can art education prepare students to encounter and engage these multiple discourses?

Liberatory Literacy Performances

The previous examples are also liberatory literacy performances (Blackburn, 2002). In particular, Facebook and YouTube provide online spaces "to work for social change," allowing people to "perform" multiple literacies and identities in ways that can destabilize discriminatory discourses against LGBTQ people and provide alternative representations (Blackburn, 2002, p. 314). Brittany McMillan used the internet to name and critique the inequity, oppression, and harassment LGBTQ youth endure, to imagine alternatives for them, and to devise a simple, direct, visible way to counter negative dominant discourses (Wackrow, 2010). The *it gets better project* provides a place for people to perform and present LGBTQ identities, lives, and stories that contradict mainstream images and messages. These videos present alternatives to the belief (and attempts to ensure) that LGBTQ people are sad, evil, unhappy sinners doomed to horrible lives (or suicide). Sharing these new stories creates "alternative Discourses" with space for constructing alternative identities (Lankshear, 1997, p. 73). As liberatory literacy performances, these *artivist* acts create possibilities for imagining and facilitating different identities, and thus precipitating possibilities for change (Blackburn, 2002). In digitally disrupting default social norms, we can admit their construction, inherent discrimination, and limitations, and work to revision/re-create them more equitably.

These literacy performance examples present more complicated discourses, too. Social media and public-response sites provide opportunities for anti-LGBTQ messages. Many online news sites allow public responses to columns, and many readers contribute homophobic remarks (Palmer, 2010). Further, when looking at these discourses one should ask whether positive and celebratory literacy performances are enough. The *it gets better project* provides space for LGBTQ-positive discourses: images, stories, and messages of hope. But when President Obama delivers a scripted message supporting LGBTQ youth, does it outweigh simultaneously insisting the Justice Department defend the *Defense of Marriage Act* and proclaiming himself to be anti-gay marriage (Hogarth, 2009)? Does having LGBTQ adults and advocates post positive digital stories destabilize such discourses? Does it position LGBTQ youth as solely victims, denying their agency (Blackburn, 2002)? Inspired by Savage, the Gay-Straight Alliance network created the *Make it Better Project* for youth to post their own video literacy performances about how they are making their own lives better now, offering other youth advice and support for doing the same. Art education can

support learning the multimedia skills youth need for meaningful participation and self-representation within such discourses.

Interventionist Art

These examples also demonstrate digital “interventionist work[s]” (Richardson, 2010). LGBTQ youth, adults, and their allies are working to construct “intellectual,” “sometimes literal,” and I would add, virtual spaces for “proposing alternative perspectives,” examples, and possibilities (Richardson, 2010, p. 19). Websites can provide *interventionist* discourses with counter-mainstream information and representations. The prominent spate of suicides has prompted a national and international dialogue outside of the LGBTQ community about the harmful results of accepting bullying as a given part of our culture. The unexpected publicity and public sympathy around these suicides signified a cultural shift about LGBTQ youth with a public awareness of their existence and the challenging, oppressive, and physically unsafe circumstances many face routinely, prompting a larger-scale, and perhaps a longer-lasting version of Richardson’s “social reorganization” (p. 21). The responses included many collaborative *activist* interventionist efforts among individuals, social forces, organizations, and groups brought into relation as a result of these tragedies (Richardson, 2010). As one example, after Canadian high school student Brittany McMillam proposed *Wear Purple Spirit Day*, LGBTQ organizations like GLAAD, HRC, and MTV adopted and promoted her idea, ensuring a much wider audience. PFLAG and GLSEN jointly developed the “Claim Your Rights” campaign. The *Make It Better Project* lists over 80 endorsing organizations.

Like the live staged intervention “events” Richardson (2010) describes, these events and campaigns “evade easy identification as either art or everyday practice,” and “function as a form of critical inquiry” with pedagogical and transformational potential (p. 19). The *it gets better project* exemplifies the hybridity of artistic work, social exchange, and activism, establishing sites where “dialogue and production...function and occur simultaneously...arriving at form and meaning not within traditional artistic structures but within the more fluid, quotidian, and habitual forms of daily life” (p. 20). The video submissions deviate from the still-homophobic norm; many present unheard, ignored, and marginalized discourses, reframing the public dialogue around LGBTQ people, issues, and rights. These efforts are “socially invasive tactics...used to establish an alternate site for thinking, [and being,] not isolated from but layered onto or coalescing within an existing social space” (p. 27). In short, pro-LGBTQ, or at least pro-tolerance or pro-acceptance perspectives are puncturing, disrupting, questioning, and displacing the previous widespread, intolerant, discriminatory, homophobic norms in the places they exist.

But such interventionist works can also complicate LGBTQ-rights discourses. Instead of intervening, more polished digital media visibility can depict a “professionalization of activists groups and movements [that] may discourage, or marginalize, grassroots involvement in human rights causes” (Mihr & Schmitz, 2007, p. 986). Interventions can disregard the importance of prolonged personal and collective direct action, substituting a one-time occurrence or detached action for sustained change efforts. Art educators can encourage students to create, enact, and evaluate the impact of interventionist work.

Implications for Art Education and Social Justice

Like many art educators, I believe we have an imperative to educate for equity, social justice aims, and a society “where the rights and privileges of democracy are available to all” (Garber, 2004, p. 16; see also Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Bastos, 2010; Darts, 2004; Desai & Chalmers, 2007; Richardson, 2010; Sandoval & Latorre, 2008). Community *artists*, like Judy Baca in Los Angeles, combine technology, arts, and social justice activism “to provide ways...creativity can be channeled, augmented, and empowered” toward these aims (Sandoval & Latorre, 2008, p. 84). *Activist* interventions are community-based acts, liberatory literacy performances (Blackburn, 2002) of “social critique, collaborative learning, public pedagogy, and research” (Richardson, 2010, p. 30). They can expose dominant discriminatory discourses that “strip” people “of their individual agencies,” defining them instead by the “fears, anxieties, and desires” of others, “policing and criminaliz[ing]” and “relegat[ing] minority communities – both children and adults – to the social margins” (Sandoval & Latorre, 2008, p. 85-86; see also Lankshear, 1997). *Activist* interventions provide glimpses of possible progress.

I echo Richardson’s (2010) belief that art educators can teach, understand, and produce interventionist practices “as a type of art informed tactical research” (p. 20). An art education that recognizes, examines, teaches, and deploys *activist*, liberatory, performative, interventionist approaches promotes becoming active community-based researchers, critical consumers and producers of knowledge and culture, and agents of change (Richardson, 2010; see also Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Bastos, 2010; Darts, 2004; Desai & Chalmers, 2007; Garber, 2004). Students find ways their concerns, voices, community resources, and collaborations can construct “a more equitable society through the engagement of critically conscious citizens” (Ginwright & Cammerota, 2002, p. 36). Technology provides tools marginalized populations can access to “challenge, respond to, and negotiate the use and misuse of power” (p. 36). Although digital technology can both “enable and constrain democracy” (Padovani, Musiani, & Pavan, 2010, p. 359), through opportunity, skills, and access, adults can mentor

youth in developing tools and strategies for recognizing and addressing power inequities and promoting systemic change for social justice

To do this, Ginwright and Cammerota (2002) encourage devising and performing collective action that questions and disrupts dominant discourses and hegemonic relations, reminiscent of Richardson's (2010) interventionist art strategies. They also recommend using new technologies to challenge societal conventions and contradictions, working to find what Podkalicka and Thomas (2010) term the "difficult balance between the more consolidated human rights tradition and digital complexity" (p. 370). Youth *artists* can learn to deploy multiple media simultaneously, suturing media and messages with music, words, images, sounds, and performances to rupture the status quo, to motivate and produce political actions, and to create change (Blackburn, 2002; Ginwright & Cammerota, 2002; Richardson, 2010; Sandoval & Latorre, 2008). Art educators can help them.

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Contemporary art as a resource for learning about human rights: a case study of the use of the *Placenta Methodology* with hospitalized adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The *Placenta Methodology* is a critical art education system developed at the Complutense University in Madrid (Spain). This article explores how the *Placenta Methodology* (Acaso, 2009) can be used to develop educational projects. In this case the authors used this methodology to work with hospitalized teenagers on the topic of human rights, using contemporary art as a medium. In the workshops they aimed to promote a critical perspective to show that art is connected to real life, and to encourage the participants to question the importance of technical training in being a contemporary artist. By placing this kind of art education project in a new environment (in this case the hospital), the authors wanted to promote the role of art education as an intellectual force instead of merely teaching handicrafts.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2003, the Complutense University in Madrid and the University of Salamanca (specifically the Research Group at the Pedagogical Museum of Children's Art and the Department of Social Psychology of the University of Salamanca) have been conducting research into the possibilities of improving the situation of hospitalized children and teenagers through contemporary art and creativity. The *Proyecto curArte* (Ullán & Belver, 2007) is a multidisciplinary project that designs and implements artistic activities intended to address the specific needs of hospitalized children, and to understand health and wellbeing through art.

Bearing in mind the Convention on the Rights of the Child, we feel that it is necessary to afford hospitalized children the same level of normalcy as experienced by other children and teenagers outside the hospital, as it is their right to play a full role in cultural and artistic life (article 31.2). In addition, everyone under 18 years of age is entitled in this Convention to quality education regardless of the context they may be in (article 28.1). For this reason, the activities we propose can be understood as an educational program that enriches the time they spend in hospital, especially in summer when teenagers are often alone in hospital (the sub-project *curArte en Verano*, *curArte* takes place in the summer).