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Circle talks as situated experiential learning: Context, identity, and knowledgeability in 'learning from reflection'

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Circle talks as situated experiential learning:

Context, identity, and knowledgeability in 'learning from reflection'

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Abstract

This article presents research that employed ethnographic and sociolinguistic methods to study ways participants learn through reflection when carried out as a ‘circle talk.’ The data indicate that participants in the event (a) invoked different contextual frames that (b) implicated them in various identity positions, which (c) impacted how they could express their knowledge. These features worked together to generate socially shared meanings that enabled participants to jointly achieve conceptualization – the ideational role ‘reflection’ is presumed to play in the experiential learning process. The analysis supports the claim that participants generate new knowledge in reflection, but challenges individualistic and cognitive assumptions regarding how this occurs. The article builds on situated views of experiential learning by showing how knowledge can be understood as socially shared and how learning and identity formation are mutually entailing processes.

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A major epistemological premise within experiential education is that 'reflection' is an essential component of learning. A widely shared view, according to Wurdinger and Paxton (2003), is that experiential learning is "a sequential process consisting of several different components, and learning occurs once one has completed the entire sequence" (p. 41). Since reflection is often depicted as the second step in the 'learning sequence' (see Kolb, 1984; Leberman & Martin, 2004), it is seen as crucial to learning itself: you cannot *learn from experience* unless you *reflect*. Thus, the process whereby "people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it" (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985, p. 19) has become central to experiential learning. And, because reflection is believed to fulfill an important cognitive function in the learning process, dedicated reflection periods are routinely included within experiential education programs (e.g., Eyler, 2001; Sugerman, Doherty, Garvey, & Gass, 2000). In this application of theory to practice, the relationship between reflection as a *mode of thought* and reflection as a *programmatic activity* seems natural and unassailable.

This article examines the epistemological basis of two central, related assumptions that influence claims about reflection and learning in experiential education: (1) that the process of abstract conceptualization in reflection can be understood in terms of individual cognition, and (2) that experience and reflection are distinct and separable phenomena that produce learning in a stepwise fashion (Fenwick, 2003). These assumptions specify when and how learning is presumed to occur in programs taking an 'experiential' approach and therefore also prescribe the use of experience-reflect cycles in practice. As cognitive assumptions about learning come under scrutiny in the wider educational literature as well as in the subfield of experiential education

(see Brown, 2010; Seaman, 2008), knowledge about how routine experiential practices support learning can benefit from examination through different methodological lenses.

To be clear, even though this article focuses on one particular form of reflective practice – the circle talk – we are not arguing that one type of practice is more or less capable of fostering learning, or that circle talks are the most widespread form of reflection (even though they have been recognized as commonplace; see Dickson, 2008). Our purpose is to further address the “lacunae” that Quay (2003) identified between a professional community’s promotion and use of highly sensuous and socially interactive educational practices on the one hand, and its adherence to a cognitivist epistemology that fragments knowing, social interaction, and identity on the other hand. Bereiter (2002) explains the limitations of this condition:

Although cooperation and teamwork are praised [in cognitive theories], the idea of cooperating in the creation of knowledge never comes to life ... it is hard to deal with the everyday fact of people jointly producing a piece of knowledge that is neither the product of one individual’s knowledge or the combination of several individuals’ knowledge. Such knowledge is typically an emergent of discourse and cannot be understood at the level of individual interacting minds. (pp. 177-178)

Despite the fact that self-conceptions regarding ‘holistic education’ as well as published models of experiential learning enjoin practitioners to maximize collaboration and meaningful conduct in order to promote learning and identity exploration, those same models fail to provide the necessary means for learning to be understood as “socially shared mental work” (Kraft, 1990) that entails related processes of identity formation. As Lave (1993) explains, ‘It is not ... sufficient to pursue a principled account of situated activity armed only with a theory of cognition and good intentions’ (p. 7). Situativity theories, by contrast, see learning as a function

of changing participation in culturally organized activities. This view impels a methodological shift away from viewing knowledge as a property of individuals. Lave (1988) writes:

...what we call cognition is in fact a complex social phenomenon... The point is not so much that arrangements of knowledge in the head correspond in a complicated way to the social world outside the head, but that they are socially organized in such a fashion as to be indivisible. 'Cognition' observed in everyday practice is distributed -- stretched over, not divided among -- mind, body, activity and culturally organized settings. (p. 1)

The problems with overly cognitive accounts of experiential learning extend beyond fueling disputes among epistemologists; pressure has mounted in recent years for educational reforms to justify their value by documenting their ability to address academic outcomes and foster higher order thinking (Ives & Obenchain, 2006). The 'evidence-based' effort currently underway has been one response to this issue (Bobilya, Holman, Lindley, & McAvoy, 2010), however, outcome-based studies typically do not aim to develop clearer views on how concepts emerge and evolve through the course of interaction. They therefore leave underlying assumptions intact, and will thus only partially address the need for more convincing accounts of how experiential programs support knowledgeable activity in a way that is consistent with contemporary educational goals.

In contrast, our approach was to use fine-grained, qualitative methods to closely examine an episode of reflection – the place in the learning cycle that is believed to yield “abstract conceptualization” (Kolb, 1984). We focused on data collected in 2007 at a diversity education program that used adventure-based and service activities as the primary means of instruction, including reflection conducted as circle talks: participants sitting in a circle and maintaining a shared focus on a topic (see Brown, 2004; Dorr-Bremme, 1990).

In our data, production of knowledge depended on participants' use of linguistic resources to shape emerging meaning and concepts by signaling dynamic shifts in context: both 'local' – i.e., a group of people sitting in a circle and talking, and 'distal' – i.e., features of the social environment in the wider community. Moreover, these shifts had identity implications, both in the here-and-now and as actors in the broader social world, which in turn impacted members' claims to knowledgeability. Importantly, these social dynamics – which can be considered experiences in their own right – should not be understood as interfering with individual knowledge acquisition; instead, we argue that they constituted the very process of conceptualization that is seen as so crucial to reflection and to experiential learning in general.

Origins of cognitive bias: Separating 'experience' and 'reflection' in theory. Reflection arose as a key element of adult education theories in the 1970s and 1980s (Boud, 1973; Boud, et al., 1985; Schön, 1983). The crucial claim was that a deliberate act of 'reflection' is required for learning to occur: "Simply to experience ... is not enough," wrote Pearson and Smith (1985): "Often we are so deeply involved in the experience itself that we are unable, or do not have the opportunity, to step back from it and reflect upon what we are doing in any critical way" (p. 69). This essentially Cartesian idea established both a practical imperative and a categorical distinction between 'phases' in a learning cycle – experience, which is messy, contingent, and untrustworthy, and reflection, which is "more explicit and more ordered" (Boud & Walker, 1990) and therefore more trustworthy. A dedicated period of reflection thereby became a cornerstone of experiential practice.

The key role of reflection in conceptions of experiential learning led to a heightened focus on reflective practices in education and other professional fields, as experiential and problem-based pedagogies expanded (Rolfe & Gardner, 2006; Vågan, 2011). Reflection became widely promoted within various practical fields due to its inscription within basic

conceptualizations of adult experiential learning, and its core assumption about separable stages in a learning cycle has echoed across the experiential education literature (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Hammel, 1986; Itin, 1999; Joplin, 1981; Priest & Naismith, 1993). As Eyer (2001) matter-of-factly quipped, “reflection is the hyphen in service-learning” (p. 35).

Despite the presumed natural connection between reflection and learning, some have argued that cognitive assumptions underwriting prevailing models of experiential learning hide the fact that there is no way to ‘step outside’ of social experience in order to reflect on it (Michelson, 1996). In other words, since one is always *in experience*, cyclic models that separate experience and reflection are hard to sustain as basic conceptualizations of learning. Following this line of reasoning, several scholars have begun to focus on the social and interactional dynamics that also necessarily constitute reflective practices. Their views further complicate the idealized, individualistic, cognitive accounts of learning-through-reflection, and bear summarizing here. First, Rea (2006) has shown how a chosen reflective activity might be redundant to the thinking people are already doing, raising questions about the actual function of a dedicated reflection event. Second, studies by Brown (2004) and Zink (2005) demonstrate that an educator can typically be expected to intervene in people’s thinking – otherwise, there is no assurance that reflection happened at all, let alone to a satisfactory or equivalent degree among all participants. These authors show that what people say during reflection periods is an unreliable indicator of thought: participants might lie or say things to satisfy an instructor. Zink (2005) noted, “students have to take care in the ways they express the meanings they construct for these to count as learning within the discourses of outdoor education” (p. 17). Additionally, using props, such as pictures, to spur discussion can help generate meaning (Loffler, 2004), but it is doubtful that this process can be understood in terms of individual cognition separate from the artifacts that mediate thinking (Middleton, 1997).

According to these analyses, reflection will always be constituted by social relations and cultural artifacts and does not directly produce learning in the manner assumed by popular models – as a cognitive process of generalization and internalization occurring *after* something else called an experience. These emerging insights raise a crucial question: if ‘reflection’ as it occurs in reality is subject to similar interactional dynamics as the ‘experience’ that preceded it, how are the social dynamics of experience consequentially related to learning? Cognitive models which do not centrally acknowledge the mediating role of forms of talk, social meaning, and identities fail to give adequate purchase on this question. And, while situativity theorists writing in the experiential education literature have mounted compelling conceptual challenges to cognitive frameworks (see Gass & Seaman, 2012), a lack of detailed examples presently makes it difficult to understand the ways ‘conceptualization’ is socially accomplished. To address this issue, we take up Zink’s (2005) challenge of studying actual practices rather than imagining them in their ideal state: in this case, conducting reflection as a circle talk.

Methodology

The analysis below was part of a larger, mixed-methods study of diversity education in a nonformal youth setting. Quantitative results showed significant changes in participants’ attitudes about diversity, but the authors called for detailed analysis of routine program elements (Seaman, Beightol, Shirilla, & Crawford, 2010). The present study sought to overcome these limitations by adopting the methodological framework known as *linguistic ethnography*, which combines ethnographic work with fine-grained linguistic analysis (Creese, 2008).

Ethnographic methods. The research locus was a weeklong, residential ‘diversity camp’ occurring in Hartford, Connecticut, in June, 2007, involving 84 racially diverse youth, ages 13-19. The camp consisted of two half-days of adventure-based teambuilding activities followed by five days of community service projects and evening recreational events. The program’s

interrelated aims were to promote interracial friendships in what is a highly segregated area, as well as helping youth participants develop more sophisticated conceptions of diversity that would afford new insights into conditions of their segregation. The program thus had related interpersonal, attitudinal, and conceptual goals. Organizers adopted an experiential approach both to better attract enrollees and for its ability to work at the first two aims; past participants had complained that the program was becoming too ‘school like’ in its approach to diversity education (see Costello, Toles, Spielberg, & Wynn, 2000 for a discussion of these issues in the context of voluntarily attended programs). But the choice to rely heavily on adventure-based and service activities complicated the third aim, progress toward which required showing how diversity-related concepts form and change without reference to any specifiable curriculum. As researchers we were interested in how participants developed new conceptions of identity and diversity without curricular resources for doing so beyond their own biographies and shared experiences at camp, and without explicit teaching by adults possessing advanced knowledge of the topic. We see this as an important epistemological challenge facing those who wish to make substantive claims about experiential learning in educational settings.

The ethnographic component of the study involved in-depth fieldwork from December, 2006 to October, 2007, consisting of semi-structured interviews with organizers, observations of organizational meetings. During the program the lead author participated in all teambuilding activities, service projects, and recreational events, documenting observations in daily fieldnotes, also collecting audio recordings of several planned and ad-hoc discussions, enabling us to compare themes across analytic grain sizes.

The stretch of talk analyzed here is drawn from a reflection session between nine teenagers and three adults while returning on a bus from a civil rights rally. (The bus’s rear seats were arranged in a horseshoe shape, making it conducive to a group discussion.) The rally

concerned repeated incidents of racial harassment and discrimination against a high-level, black state employee. Some of the speakers who appear below had personal connections to the employee: he was Shayla and Malcolm’s uncle,ⁱ and Ronnie was their cousin. Other speakers include Roberta, an African American girl who attends a school in a wealthy suburb where black youth represent 5% of the student population; Jenny, a white girl who attends the same school as Roberta; Alan and Joan, white program leaders from affluent suburban communities; and Jamal, a black, Jamaican American program leader who personally knows Shayla, Malcolm, and Ronnie.ⁱⁱ Other ethnographic details are presented as warranted by specific instances in the data.

Sociolinguistic methods. We approached our linguistic data with two main goals: (1) to identify how concepts were established and given meaning over a longer speech event, and (2) to understand the implications of this on participants’ identities and possibilities for learning. These goals were accomplished by studying *deictics* (Levinson, 1983) or what Wortham (1996) calls *shifters*. Shifters are pronouns that not only refer to – or index – broader features of social life, but that also help create an environment for local interaction. “*We*, for instance, can both refer to and establish an interactional group” (Wortham, 1996, p. 332, italics in original). Pronouns function as *shifters* because they signal what Goodwin and Duranti (1992) call contextual frames, helping people follow topical changes in conversation (their *denotational* function) as well as norms for participation (their *interactional* function). Because shifters provide participants with crucial information, they also serve as cues to researchers about the ways local meanings and norms are established and change over time. Table 1 lists categories of common pronominal shifters.

Table 1: Common Shifters by Type

1 st Person	2 nd Person	3 rd Person	Spatial	Temporal	Demonstrative
<i>I, we, me</i>	<i>You</i>	<i>She, he, they</i>	<i>Here, there</i>	<i>Here, now</i>	<i>It, this, that</i>

Wortham (1996) cautions that it can be unclear to analysts what shifters refer to even when speakers show no apparent trouble understanding one another in the original event. Analysts must therefore determine the speaker, the tense surrounding the pronoun, and whether the event that is referenced is the *narrating* event (i.e., the local conditions at present, as in “Can I have your attention now”) or the *narrated* event (an event or condition elsewhere or in the past, as in “When I was at the store...”).

Analysis involves creating a *deictic map* (Wortham, 1996), a systematic way of outlining the key components described above. To create such a map, transcript lines are numbered and all pronouns are highlighted. Maps are populated first by noting the speaker, then by locating pronouns in their relevant column and noting their specific referent (what they index), then by determining the tense of the utterance containing the pronoun. Finally, the analyst determines whether the pronoun indexes the *narrating* event or a *narrated* event. Maps can then be interpreted for shifts in contextual frame, which make available alternative sources of meaning and presuppose different social norms.

Results

Below we exhibit two segments of talk followed by deictic maps of the segments. Due to space limitations, we focus on stretches of talk that illustrate the three phenomena of interest: (a) How contextual frames are established, shift, and generate meaning; (b) how these shifts contain identity implications at both the ‘local’ and ‘distal’ levels; and (c) how these dynamics bear on peoples’ claims to knowledgeability and, ultimately, the process of conceptualization that ‘reflection’ is supposed to produce.

Exhibit 1: Creating the Circle Talk and Establishing the Topicⁱⁱⁱ

1a: Transcribed Segment (3:14 – 4:22)

-
- | | | |
|----|------------------|---|
| 1. | WMF Alan: | So guys hey guys guys guys (.2) While all of this is fresh in our |
| 2. | | mind here and without everybody talkin’ all at once=having a little |
| 3. | | bit of order uh, what’d you think? |

4. **BFP Shayla:** **It** was good.
5. **BFP Roberta:** Yeah, **it** was good.
6. **Alan:** What was good about **it**?
- 7. **BMP Malcolm** (1) The speech.
8. **UFP:** Yeah.
9. **Shayla:** Like, all the different races that came out to support **him**, and like all
10. the people from the different
11. **BMP Ronnie:** [That **we** had so much public leaders from
12. Connecticut come out.
13. **WFF Joan:** =Yeah.
14. **Alan:** Right. There were State people **there** City people **there**
15. **Ronnie:** I'm just glad that **dey** came to support
16. **Shayla:** [There were representatives, too
- 17. **Ronnie:** And **you** come from da West Indies↓ (hh) da West Indies. **I'm**
18. jus playin' wit **you**.
19. **WFP Jenny:** [**that** was a horrible thing to say
20. **UMP:** heh heh
21. **Malcolm:** whoa:::
22. **Voices:** heh heh
23. **Alan:** Hold on guys guys hold on.
24. **Ronnie:** **she** said the stupid ting
- 25. **Alan:** Roberta, **you y-you you** said **it** was pretty emotional. W-What was up?

The primary accomplishments in Exhibit 1a are the establishment of local norms and topics for discussion, which are both essential conditions for the programmatic activity of 'reflecting'. These accomplishments run across several turns. First, Alan establishes the activity in five ways: claiming the floor and justifying his reason for doing so in line 1, where he also creates an arena for mutual concern with *our*; proposing turn-taking protocols in lines 2-3; and at the end of line 3 relinquishing the floor and initiating an adjacency pair, which begs completion by another speaker (Levinson, 1983). Shayla and Roberta respond appropriately to these cues through brief, monologic turns in lines 4-5. This initial pattern is disrupted in line 11 as Ronnie interrupts Shayla, initiating a new, more dialogic pattern that continues through line 17, indicated by overlapping speech. This licenses participants to speak directly after one another rather than to Alan. Ronnie shifts the contextual frame quite dramatically in line 18 when he 'snaps' Shayla, (discussed below). The circle talk frame is reestablished by Alan not only in line 23 when he

stops Ronnie’s game – which exemplifies the lack of order he prohibits in lines 2-3 – but also when he re-initiates monologic turn-taking by asking a direct question of Roberta in line 25. The denotational and interactional features of the segment are identified more clearly in the following deictic map.

1b: Deictic Map of Segment

Line	Speaker	1 st Person	2 nd Person	3 rd Person	Spatial	Temporal	Tense	Demonstrative	Narrated/ narrating
1a	Alan						Present	<i>This</i> -ambiguous	Ambiguous
1b	Alan	<i>Our</i> -everyone present					Present		Narrating
2	Alan				<i>Here</i> -on the bus	<i>Here</i> -now	Present		Narrating
3	Alan		<i>You</i> -anyone				Past		Narrated
4	Shayla						Past	<i>It</i> -ambiguous	Narrated
5	Ronnie						Past	<i>It</i> -ambiguous	Narrated
6	Alan						Past	<i>It</i> -ambiguous	Narrated
9	Shayla			<i>Him</i> -employee			Past		Narrated
11	Ronnie	<i>We</i> -ambig					Past		Narrated
14a	Alan				<i>There</i> -rally		Past		Narrated
14b	Alan				<i>There</i> -rally		Past		Narrated
15a	Ronnie	<i>I</i> 'm-Ronnie					Present		Narrated
15b	Ronnie			<i>They</i> -reps.			Past		Narrated
17a	Ronnie		<i>You</i> -Shayla				Present		Narrating
17b	Ronnie	<i>I</i> 'm-Ronnie					Present continuous		Narrating
18	Ronnie		<i>You</i> -Shayla				Present		Narrating
19	Jenny						Past	<i>That</i> -Ronnie's comment	Narrated
24	Ronnie			<i>She</i> -Shayla			Past		Narrated
25a	Alan		<i>You</i> -Roberta				Past		Narrated
25b	Alan						Past	<i>It</i> -the rally	Narrated

Exhibit 1b illustrates in clearer detail how topics and norms were established. In line 1, the meaning of *this* is ambiguous, but the possibilities are narrowed by the use of past tense throughout lines 3-6. The topical ambiguity is resolved further in line 7, when Malcolm supplies “the speech” which retrospectively defines the meaning of “it” as the rally (as opposed, say, to missing routine camp activities). Subsequent indexical pronouns *him*, *there*, and *there* solidify the contextual frame of the rally as the ‘narrated’ event and differentiate it from the ‘narrating’

event of the circle talk, which is denoted by the use of first and second person pronouns and present tense. Already two contextual frames have been established.

Ronnie dramatically establishes a third frame in line 18 when he ‘snaps’ Shayla. Snapping refers to a stylized form of verbal sparring common in African American speech communities:

... two opponents duel verbally, making derogatory remarks about each other and/or each others’ family members. Participants play the game with persons they know or who are in their circle of acquaintances. To stay within the boundaries, they use exaggerated statements that do not, in reality, characterize the opponent’s family members and family life. (Green, 2002, p. 138)

The relevant contextual frame is no longer the circle talk but a game between Ronnie and Shayla. Ronnie’s move has denotational and interactional implications. Denotationally, through the use of *you*, Ronnie references Shayla both here-and-now and in a continuous sense – “you come from the West Indies.” The ‘snap’ thus gets its force by invoking specific social knowledge, functioning as follows: in saying “There were representatives, too,” Shayla repeated what Ronnie said in line 11, Alan essentially repeated in line 14, and Ronnie fully ratified in line 15, with *they*. The accusation is that she failed to grasp that “public leaders” and “state people” implies “representatives.” By mentioning their shared West Indian background as a continuous feature of her identity, Ronnie implies that she has fallen short of the expectations for intellectual performance within their family and community and that he, in catching her mistake, is more capable of meeting them. Ronnie is not making a serious charge, however; Shayla has actually fulfilled these expectations by having entered college the previous year, whereas Ronnie had not yet completed high school. This irony sets up their antagonism in the game.

Importantly, this contextual shift has identity implications not only for Ronnie and Shayla: everyone else is party to the game, hence Malcolm and others collude as audience members in lines 20-22. Successful performance here involves knowing the social grounds for the particular insult and also the rules for opponents and audience members when ‘playing the dozens’ is happening. It is possible that Jenny (who says “*that* was a horrible thing to say” in line 19, which indexes the circle talk frame and in so doing characterizes the exchange somewhat inaccurately) does not recognize the game and so interprets Ronnie’s meaning according to the ‘circle talk’ frame. But the game, however brief, makes Shayla and Ronnie’s ethnic background, and the community norms it entails, a relevant contextual feature in creating local meaning. This is the first instance where the local event and the broader social world intersect, with implications for identities across both planes.

The frame shifts to the circle talk in Line 23, when Alan claims the floor. Ronnie’s *she said* in line 24 indexes the same exchange as Jenny’s *that* and signals that he is again participating in the circle talk frame; the game is finished.

Exhibit 2: Roberta’s situation. The next segment occurred several turns later, after Roberta responded to Alan’s questions about incidents of racism at her school.

2a: Transcribed Segment (6:00 – 7:47)

49. **Alan:** So part a the issue is **you** feel less () less supported. **I’m** tryin’ to get
 50. a-at what Malcolm was sayin’. What were **you** sayin’? “Why don’t
 51. **you** do sometin’ about **it**?”
- 52. **Malcolm:** Yeah instead of [**you**] sittin’ ere and takin’ (.) **I** mean, like, yeah↑ it’s
 53. **your** school but then again what=if **you** takin’ all **dat**, and **you**’re
 54. gonna to go to the same school, **you**’re not learnin’ anything.
 55. **You**’re just sittin’ ‘ere takin’...
- 56. **Roberta:** Well **I’m**-if **I** were to have to come to a rally every time that, like,
 57. something racist was happening in **my** school, **we** might as well
 58. have school right on that front porch.
59. **Ronnie:** WO::W
 60. **UFP:** [Wow.
61. **Roberta:** [**We** mi↑ght as well.
- 62. **Shayla:** **It**’s not that easy though. Cuz **I** don’t think that **you**
 63. **Roberta:** [**It**’s not (.) **it**’s not
 → 64. **Shayla:** [**You**’re not at a predominantly white school

65. **Malcolm:** [I do
 66. **Shayla:** [and it's not that
 67. easy, like, to be goin' around cussin' out evryone evry time.
 68. **Ronnie:** [I went to a Florida school and it had racists in it
 69. **Malcolm:** Well-well then go to a new school
 → 70. **Jenny:** But you see they do that and then it creates a separa↑tion
 71. **Shayla:** [But the
 → 72. thing is, you go to a new school, you're makin' these people fil like
 → 73. "Yes(.) I got her" Yer makin'-yer makin' them fil like you are
 74. scaert. And I know how you fil because I was the only black one
 75. who graduated from my middle school in Eastville and I had a lot
 76. of racism. Where I can play basketball, an I can play soccer=you
 77. know where I spen my time? (.) Warmin' the bench. And that really
 78. killed me and I know how you-I know how you fil
 79. **Ronnie:** [so do I
 80. **Shayla:** [so
 81. switchin' schools↑ (.) yeah-it might help you fil better =but at the
 82. same time=it's not, because () you want to stay because, like, just
 → 83. because you say this=that and the third about me↑ =I'm still here
 → 84. and I'm-I got my aims I have feelin's, and I'm gonna keep doin' I've
 85. gotta do. Because you're not the one <who gonna gimme my
 86. education =gimme a diploma =sen' me through college and>(.) all
 → 87. this other good stuff↓. So basically I-you-you keep doin' whatchu
 88. haf to do, you keep goin' to Grandview School, and do all the other
 89. stuff because =they not goin' putchu down↓. (.4)

In this segment, the key accomplishment is a social move to conceptualization. Alan sustains the reflective activity of the circle talk but the topic fully shifts from the rally to Roberta's experiences of racism and the adequacy of her strategies for dealing with it, and then to strategies for dealing with racism in general. Malcolm engages in the circle talk frame by addressing Roberta directly, questioning her approach to dealing with 'all dat,' i.e., racism. Roberta defends herself by commenting that school would need to be permanently held on the State House steps due to the frequent rallies that would ensue. Shayla firmly shifts the topic on line 62 from racism in general to strategies for dealing with it, which to this point was vaguely indicated by Malcolm and Roberta: *it* refers to Alan's question on lines 50-51, "*do somethin' about it.*" Notice the difference in what *it* indexes here: In line 51, it is "acts of racism" and in line 62 it is "doing something about acts of racism," a denotational shift ratified by Roberta in line 63. In line 67 Shayla offers one strategy and notes its limitations: "cussin' out evryone evry time."

The denotational aspects of this exchange are key understanding how conceptualization is socially accomplished; the discussion is moving from the particulars of Roberta’s experience to a general discussion about the obduracy of racism and the viability of different strategies for dealing with it. The first obvious sign of this is Roberta’s characterization of her school experience, but the scope is still limited to her individual case. Shayla expands the discussion in line 67 when she says “It’s not that easy to *be goin’ cussin’ out evryone* evry time.” “Evry time” provides support for Roberta’s claim of frequency, but the more convincing expansion is accomplished in *be goin’ cussin’ out evryone*. “Habitual be” as it is used here signals a continuous, ongoing condition in African American vernacular (Green, 2002; Smitherman, 1977). Shayla thus begins to construe acts of racism as a frequent and continuous feature in the lives of black youth, especially in predominantly white schools – what is essentially a truth claim. Jenny’s statement “*they do that*” – i.e., black kids leave white suburban schools – in line 70 supports our assertion that this wider meaning has become available and they are no longer only talking about Roberta – this helps ratify Shayla’s observation. Roberta, then, is both present in the circle talk and exists as a character in an emerging hypothetical scenario involving persistent racism at school.

A minor but not insubstantial dimension of the above exchange is Shayla’s brief aside on line 64, when she states that Malcolm does not attend a predominantly white school. She is not merely stating an empirical fact, but is challenging Malcolm’s legitimacy as a commentator (see Rymes, 1996). She is implying that someone who does not attend a predominantly white school (a) does not know what it is like, and (b) is not in a position to judge or tell anyone who does, what to do. This establishes Shayla’s superior knowledgeability.

2b: Abridged Deictic Maps of Segment

Line	Speaker	3 rd Person			Spatial	Temporal	Tense	Demonstrative	Narrated/ narrating
		1 st Person	2 nd Person						

52a	Malcolm		<i>You-</i> Roberta (implied)	Present continuous	Narrated
52b	Malcolm	<i>I-</i> Malcolm		Present	Narrating
56a	Roberta	<i>I'm-</i> Roberta		Present	Narrated or narrating
56b	Roberta	<i>I-</i> Roberta		Present unreal conditional	Narrated unreal
57a	Roberta	<i>My-</i> Roberta		Present unreal conditional	Narrated unreal
57b	Roberta	<i>We-</i> fellow students		Present unreal conditional	Narrated unreal

In Line 52, Malcolm’s *implied you* and *I* shifts from the narrated event as he imagines it - that Roberta is passively “takin’ all dat” - to the circle talk. The implication is that Roberta in the *narrating* event is unable to act as her own agent in the *narrated* event. Roberta disputes Malcolm’s characterization by conditionally extending his imagined event in lines 56-57: *if* she were to do something every time a racist act happened, *then* black students at her school would need to hold rallies all the time. Denotationally, Malcolm and Roberta are using the contextual frame of her situation to assess the viability of her options. Interactionally, the suggestion that Roberta is complicit in her own oppression has ‘face’ implications for her, creating a need to justify her choices. Like Malcolm’s compromised claim to knowledgeability, this illustrates the way identity on both the local and broader social planes shaped the way ‘abstract conceptualization’ is socially accomplished.

Line	Speaker	1 st Person	2 nd Person	3 rd Person	Spatial	Temporal	Tense	Demonstrative	Narrated/ narrating
62a	Shayla						Present continuous	<i>It-</i> Doing something about racism	Narrated
62b	Shayla	<i>I-</i> Shayla					Present		Narrating
62c	Shayla		<i>You-</i> uncertain				Present continuous		Narrated/ narrating
64	Shayla		<i>You-</i> Malcolm				Present continuous		Narrated

Shayla makes a general assertion on line 62, challenging Malcolm’s characterization of Roberta in the disputed imaginary event. Two or possibly three contextual frames are indicated here: The first is signaled by *it’s*, which apparently refers to Roberta’s options although could be interpreted more broadly. The second is signaled by *I*, which locates Shayla as a speaker in the circle talk. The third is indicated by *you*, where it is unclear whether Shayla is referring to Malcolm or to “people in Roberta’s situation.” In line 64, *you* refers to Malcolm here-and-now; his clipped retort in line 65 (“I do”) suggests that he has sensed her implication that he is not in a position to judge Roberta. In this segment, two clear and a third possible frame are operating: (1) the circle talk, in which speakers are increasingly required to explain their reasoning and the experiential basis for it; (2) Roberta’s specific situation, the interpretation of which is disputed; and (3) a more general exploration of racism, which is ambiguous at this point. (However, as we noted above, Jenny’s comment on Line 70 makes this contextual frame more fully available.)

Line	Speaker	1st Person	2nd Person	3rd Person	Spatial	Temporal	Tense	Demonstrative	Narrated/ narrating
72a	Shayla		<i>You-</i> Malcolm, or black students facing racism				Present real conditional		Narrated real or unreal?
72b	Shayla		<i>You-</i> Malcolm, or black students facing racism				Present		Narrated real or unreal?
72c	Shayla			<i>These people- Racists</i>			Present		Narrated real or unreal?
73a	Shayla	<i>I-Racists</i>					Past		Narrated unreal
73b	Shayla			<i>Her- Roberta, maybe Shayla</i>			Past		Narrated unreal
73c	Shayla		<i>You’re (x2)- Malcolm, or black students facing racism</i>				Present		Narrated real or unreal?

73d	Shayla	<i>Them-</i> Racists	Present	Narrated real or unreal?
73e	Shayla	<i>You-</i> Malcolm, or black students facing racism	Present	Narrated real or unreal?

Shayla's turn in lines 72-73 contains considerable ambiguity. In most cases it is unclear who she means with *you* and even *her*, or if she is speaking of real or hypothetical events. But this ambiguity is not problematic and in fact, is crucial for her effect. Other cues help access her meaning. In 72a and 72b she could be referring to Malcolm or to black students in general who pursue the option he has proposed; her use of present tense suggests it is the latter. Notably, too, she invents a scenario in line 73 that does not exist in Roberta's particular example, in which a female student appeases her racist tormentors by leaving school.

Of special significance here are the subject pronouns. Throughout both lines, *you* is sufficiently ambiguous that addressees can project themselves into the roles she constructs in the example, especially Malcolm and Roberta. She models this herself; although she uses *I* from the speaker position in 73a, her use of reported speech eliminates any confusion about the fact that she is referring to hypothetical racists and not to herself. *Her* (73b) could also mean Roberta or even Shayla. In other words, there is no confusion about the contextual frame she is invoking even though there is ambiguity in the subject pronouns. Koven's research (2002) suggests this move functions through *role inhabitation*, allowing addressees to imagine themselves in the positions Shayla is constructing and thus helping them to access the perspectives of black youth facing discrimination in school. Koven, who describes this as *role coordination*, is worth quoting at length:

Personal pronouns, verb tenses, etc. may no longer point to person, place, and time in the current event of speaking, but rather, may function to re-present the narrated event of

speaking. In this way, the speaker makes come alive a context different from that of the immediate interaction... In so doing, [speakers who merge roles in this way] try to bring their audience into various kinds of *perspectival alignments* in both the here-and-now and the there-and-then. When people coordinate these multiple speaker roles, this has the potential to yield a range of complex, multi-layered presentations of the speaker’s affects, attitudes, and identifications. (pp. 189-190, italics added)

Line	Speaker	1 st Person	2 nd Person	3 rd Person	Spatial	Temporal	Tense	Demonstrative	Narrated/ narrating
87a	Shayla						Future	<i>This-</i> Rewards	Narrated unreal
87b	Shayla	<i>I-</i> Shayla					Present		Narrated/ narrating?
87c	Shayla		<i>You-</i> Roberta or people in her situation				Present continuous		Narrated/ narrating
87d	Shayla		<i>You-</i> Roberta or people in her situation				Present continuous		Narrated/ narrating

In ending her performance in line 87 and shifting back to the circle talk frame, Shayla capitalizes on the juxtaposition between the two. Her triumphant protagonist has presented a commanding alternative and she converts this into direct advice; the stretch “*I—you—you*” is not so much a stutter by Shayla as it is a marker of frame boundaries and an indication of the empathic connection that has been forged because of (a) the legitimacy of her ‘rights to advise’ over Malcolm’s (see Rymes, 1996), and (b) the ambiguous role identity of the protagonist, which could be Shayla, Roberta, or perhaps any academically motivated black youth.

Discussion and Implications

Speakers in the above segment were not merely reviewing the rally they had just attended, even though this was the explicit intent of the discussion – to learn by ‘reflecting’ on it. They used various interactional strategies and drew on intricate knowledge of the social world in

order to collectively explore and develop complex understandings of racism, how one might confront it, and its implications on real world concerns such as academic attainment. The social dynamics of the local speech event were crucial to sharing meaning as well as the way conceptualization was accomplished. Shayla's performance, for example, evolves into a highly cadenced, testimonial style that greatly assists in her construction of black youth as academically committed and resilient. In this instance, other members of the circle talk are not so much listening to her ideas as they are bearing witness to achievement in the face of adversity, a narrative that has been repeated many times in her church and with considerable familial and community reinforcement. Therefore, it is less the case that Shayla is merely describing her ideas to Roberta, who internalizes them, and more the case that Shayla creatively enacts a mode of anti-oppressive social practice that is well rooted in her community, which contains a model of identity, an attitude of self-efficacy, and a discursive repertoire to which Roberta can apprentice. In this sense, 'reflection' is situated in, that is, indissoluble from, modes of acting in the social world (Quay, 2003).

We are not trying to imply that reflection is unrelated to experiential learning or that it does not yield 'abstract conceptualization' as claimed by commonly accepted models (e.g., Kolb, 1984). Rather, our analysis highlights the profoundly social nature of routine experiential practices, challenging overly cognitive and individualist conceptions of experiential learning and reflection. As our data show, conceptualizations of 'diversity' along with attitudes about the self here were (a) socially accomplished, and (b) dependent on meaning that gets its force from shared experiences in the broader social world – in this case, experiences in highly segregated schooling, along with various familial and community norms regarding how youth should navigate it.

By emphasizing social practices and context, our analysis advances existing challenges to

individualistic and overly cognitive conceptions of experiential learning (e.g., Fenwick, 2003), suggesting that experiential learning is always a social accomplishment that is situated in particular practices and social communities – even during an event that itself derives from cognitivist assumptions. The analysis further asks experiential educators and scholars to examine how learning processes reflect both generic forms of social organization – e.g., the circle talk, ‘playing the dozens,’ testifying and bearing witness – and also enable the creative possibility of new identities and meanings *in situ*. In our example, broader, socially available meanings concerning academically motivated black youth were made *locally* available in order to manage Roberta’s practical problem: how to succeed in school despite rampant discrimination, along with handling face threats in the immediate group. These meanings helped construct new attitudes and possibilities for Roberta while also probing the limitations of how that identity could play out – ‘cussin’ evryone out’ and leaving schools were two options that Shayla chose not to pursue and yet she achieved anyways, using her strength and strong goal orientation. Shayla’s narrative also gives insight into the community resources that are available for black youth in different social locations, pointing to possible ways emerging interest areas like ‘resilience’ (Ewert & Yoshino, 2011) are socially situated.

Conclusion.

Our analysis suggests, on the one hand, that experiential learning is ‘situated’ but, on the other hand, that situated learning does not mean learning across spatial and temporal boundaries is impossible: instead, seeing learning as situated forces analysts to determine how abstraction is socially accomplished and mediated by cultural forms such as “aesthetic experience, narrative, metaphor, and performance as well as scientific concepts, graphic models, or experimentation” (Lampert-Shepel, 1999, p. 79). Moreover, as Lampert-Shepel points out, this awareness changes the meaning of reflection from a cognitive process of theory refinement and subsequent transfer

to the collaborative use of theories as social tools for addressing real-world problems – which, in our example, included the management of local identities in the ‘circle talk.’ She argues that reflection should be considered itself an activity, “a strategic intervention in a discourse context” (p. 85). “Even on the intermental level,” she continues provocatively, “reflection remains social, in the sense that it preserves the dialogical stance of human interaction” (p. 86).

At least, our data show that the programmatic activity of reflection can possess dynamics that richly and consequentially shape learning, and we view it as theoretically problematic to consider ‘reflection’ as somehow distinct from ‘experience’ as discrete phases in a learning cycle. Moreover, as Vadeboncouer (2006) writes, since “contexts for learning are constituted through participation” (p. 240), new methods of analysis that focus on meaning and identity *in situ* can help understand how people propose and negotiate concepts during routine experiential practices, or when and why specific geographical locations or features of the wider social environment are made to matter to particular individuals. Additional research into various forms that ‘reflection’ takes in practice will help further understand the potential and limits of experiential learning in a variety of settings.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Pseudonyms are used.

ⁱⁱ Speakers are identified using shorthand in the first transcribed segment by racial, gender, and role identities, in that order: U=unidentified speaker; B=black, W=white; M=male, F=female; P=participant, and F=facilitator (e.g., WMF= white male facilitator).

ⁱⁱⁱ Indexical pronouns are bolded and labeled in the map according to line and location; for instance, line 1 contains two indexical pronouns, *this* and *our*. These are labeled 1a and 1b in the map. Transcription conventions follow those developed by Jefferson (2004), as below:

(1)	duration of pause in seconds – (.) indicates micropause
[overlapping talk
underlined text	emphasized by speaker
=	“latching” – immediately successive talk
↓ or ↑	Marked pitch movement indicating non-neutral emphasis
(hh)	Laughter
::	Elongation of the prior sound
→	Point/line of interest

Wavy, horizontal lines in deictic maps indicate a shift in contextual frame, and horizontal, a double black line indicates text removal due to space limitations.