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Studio V

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Assignment 6

Ethnographic Description of Second School Visit

The PDI Studio V class from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute visited the Art Community Charter School for a second time to gather more information about the students’ lives, interests, academic strengths and weaknesses, and cultural background. The main focus of this visit was to test a device my team made and collect feedback that sheds light on how the students interact with various learning tools. My team designed an activity that involved moving magnets around on a metal board as a means of learning the parts of speech. These magnets spelt out sentences from popular pop and rap songs. We predicted that the kids would not be interested in the grammar activity as a standalone exercise, but would pay attention if the grammar activity was built around songs that they liked.

My teammate and I created several metal boards, about 8.5”x11”, that each had word magnets spelling out three different lyrical lines from three different songs. One was a song by Justin Beiber, another by Nicki Minaj, and the last by Carly Rae Jepsen. These songs were chosen based on how frequently they are played on the radio and their perceived popularity with the pre-teen age group. There were also larger word magnets that spelled out the different parts of speech, such as “adjective,” “verb,” and “noun.” The objective of the exercise was for the kids to slide the words from the lyrics underneath their corresponding category. To engage and excited the students further, the three songs were played in the background while the activity was being performed.

We started off the exercise by introducing ourselves and asking the kids if they knew what the different parts of speech were. In almost every group, the students stared back with blank expressions. However, once we jogged their memories by listing one or two parts of speech, the students could generally finish the list as a group. One boy, who I would guess to be Caucasian, appeared offended that we were asking if they knew the parts of speech. He said, “Are you serious? We’re in 5th grade already. Of course we know this stuff.” However, when we asked him specific questions about the parts of speech, he did not know the answers. The initial reactions of the kids let us to believe that while their education had exposed them to the structure of a sentence, there were serious learning gaps still present.

Enthusiasm levels were generally low when we reviewed the parts of speech with the students, but once we played the songs on a computer and the exercise began, the excitement levels rose drastically. One girl of perceived African American descent knew every word to the Nicki Minaj song and sang along happily while she organized the lyrics into nouns, adjectives, prepositions, and so forth. When we asked the students if they knew and liked the songs, we learned that every student asked knew every one of the three songs, but not all of them like them. One boy, who I would guess to be Hispanic, said, “I don’t want Justin Beiber! How about some real music, like Drake or Lil’ Wayne?” His reaction prompted us to ask the students what musical artists they would like to hear instead. The feedback we received will be taken into account in future iterations of this project.

We found that the aforementioned boy was not engaged in the word magnet activity, and instead spent most of the time talking to me about subjects not related to grammar. He was also distracted easily by the computer that was playing the music. He tried to play different songs on it until instructed to not touch the computer. When I inquired as to why he did not want to do the activity, he said he did not mind the activity, but the songs were bad. In contrast, the girl who loved Nicki Minaj was engrossed in the activity until the time was up and she was instructed to move to the next table.

My team member and I encountered a flaw in our plan after the first group switched to the next table. At the end of the exercise, the words from the songs are all listed under the corresponding grammatical category. However, for the next group to do the same exercise as the first, the words would need to start in their original position: spelling out the lyrics of the three songs. Because we ended up restoring the magnet boards along with the kids, a significant amount of time was lost. However, we improved our efficiency with each new group. Future iterations of our project will address the set-up time involved in performing the activity.

There were clearly differences in the educational backgrounds of the different students. One boy of perceived Middle Eastern descent knew what each part of speech was and promptly organized the words in the songs into their corresponding categories. In contrast, one girl of perceived African American descent was not able to categorize any of the words without my assistance or assistance from the “cheat sheet” we provided. Another interesting observation is that the success rates of the students increased drastically when they worked as a team instead of individually. The process of getting to an answer is where learning appeared to be most effective, and we found that when two or more students were trying to arrive at an answer together, they would teach each other and discuss the material until they could agree on an answer.

The overall feedback on the activity was positive, but it is clear that there are still several improvements left to be made. When asked if she would do it for fun at home, one girl said, “Yea, I probably would if I didn’t have much else to do. I like it.” In response, another student said, “No way, you’re lying.” She replied, “No I think it is fun.” This confirmed the idea that some students viewed the exercise as an educational tool with a little bit of fun mixed in, and others viewed it as fun with a little bit of education mixed in. However, the students all agreed that the activity was preferable over a more traditional, paper-based classroom exercise.

As stated previously, the hypothesis was that the kids would not be interested in the grammar activity as a standalone exercise, but would pay attention if the grammar activity was built around songs that they liked. This hypothesis appears to be true based off of two findings: the students had very little interest in learning the parts of speech until music was tied in, and the students who liked the songs that were being played displayed more engagement overall than the students who disliked the songs. Further development of this project will utilize these findings to create a learning model that caters to the interests and educational needs of the students.