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Youth Video Productions of Dance Performances

Kylie Pepler and Yasmin Kafai

In this chapter we turn to video productions and dance performances that are popular among youth in the Computer Clubhouses. Often in organizing videos and performing these dances, Clubhouse members demonstrate the type of youth leadership and initiative that is common across the Clubhouse Network. While dance happened to be a popular mode of expression in the South Los Angeles Clubhouse, many of the other Clubhouses report that youth engage in collaborative beat mixing or music making, which pulls in large groups of young people in a similar manner.

Across the Network, some of the most extensive interests include dance and music making. Instead of neglecting the cultural innovations taking place around the Clubhouse, the space is infused by them, allowing members to build upon their interests to document local community practices from the ground up. This is often very different from introducing a set of new tools or practices—like the ones described with Scratch in previous chapters—that originated in another culture.

To illustrate how Clubhouse youth engage collaboratively we delve into the culture of dance productions and performances in the Youth Opportunities Unlimited (Y.O.U.) Inc. Computer Clubhouse in South Los Angeles. In particular, we draw upon the Krump dance movement and the local performances at the Clubhouse, where members organized, videotaped, and edited collaborative dance circles, often involving 30 to 40 Clubhouse members. Krump, often associated with Clowning, is a dance style brought to mainstream attention by the documentary, *Rize* (LaChappelle, 2005). Krump originated in South Los Angeles and references African dance forms in what is commonly seen as positive expressions of anger or releases of pent-up emotion. The dance itself can be characterized by free, expressive, and highly energetic moves. As Krump is a popular feature of many music videos, members at this Clubhouse experiment with their own documentation techniques, not relying on outsiders to capture and edit their story. The efforts of urban youth to find an artistic outlet for expression can help us understand how youth organize and engage in learning activities. In addition, paying attention to local funds of knowledge can turn our attention to successful practices in low-income communities that so often are portrayed as deficient in resources and agency.

CLUBHOUSE KRUMPING

The Krump culture evolved in the Clubhouse space as youth merged their dance practices and their technology interests—each informing the other. Youth created and filmed hundreds of dance videos at the Clubhouse, moving from dance to other aspects of production, including recording, editing, and staging these events. Over the 4 years of our observations at the Youth Opportunities Unlimited Inc. Computer Clubhouse, we counted more than 250 homemade videos stored on their server. Numerous field notes written by mentors documented dance performances and recordings as part of daily Clubhouse activities. We use a series of smaller vignettes to describe how Krumping was part of the youth organizing efforts of the Computer Clubhouse members, an example of where the youth were able to successfully organize themselves during the course of our observations. The various facets of the youths' capture of the dance activities are explored and presented with excerpts from the field notes and screen captures of the youth engaged in the making of the dance videos. We explored three aspects of the Clubhouse Krump culture that we felt were important to better understanding youth organizing, collaboration, and community development: critique and expertise, the division of labor, and the cultural perspectives of insiders/outsideers on these events.

The following is an edited version of several field notes that were written by four different mentors, describing the same day's events (May 2, 2006) at the Computer Clubhouse. In this vignette, the mentor comes into the room and notices a group of young people around the computer. The mentor then discovers that the youth are working on editing a dance video from one of their previous dance performances. Kaylee takes on the role of the editor, in part because she is the only one at the site with the technological know-how to do this.

Viewing and Editing the Artifact. When I first came into the Clubhouse I noticed around seven of the younger members crowded over one of the computers. They were all watching a dance video that they created last Thursday. I walked around and noticed that Kaylee wanted to look through the dance video and edit certain clips out. In the video, I saw a circle of members with one member dancing in the middle. The youth took turns coming into the middle of the circle to dance in front of the camera. The dances ranged from Krumping to breaking, to other styles. The kids seemed really interested in the movie because they were debating what clips to keep and how to improve it.

One of the key organizational attributes of the dance is the idea of the circle. The circle has been prominent in dance cultures around the world but nevertheless is an important way for the youth to organize. By forming a circle while dancing, it places everyone on an equal plane until someone chooses to take the center of the circle, at which point they take the lead. This places an importance on individual agency within the group and at the same time places everyone on equal footing. The editing of the video, additionally, becomes an important site for learning. The youth critique the performance, the camera angles, and the best way to edit the

video. The contribution of the technology to this activity is twofold: (1) as an artifact for documentation and as a tool for reflection beyond the ephemeral dance performance; and (2) as an additional mode of expression beyond the dance itself, allowing for more youth to participate in the viewing and editing process, even if they were not in the original dance production.

The Dance Performance. After painting their faces, the youth were ready to record again. When the DJ played the song “Gimme That” by Chris Brown . . . two members, one African American right around age 7 or 8 and another member . . . initiated the video and the rest were soon to follow. Each member went in front of the camera and started dancing. They all performed individually with different styles of break dancing, while the girls focused on incorporating the hip-hop-like dance moves that were completely different from the moves of the boys. When they started recording, the younger members were very intrigued at being able to see themselves on screen and for others to see them as well. The younger ones would constantly take turns going in front of the camera, making funny faces or posing at different angles. I asked the older girls, “So what role do you serve in this project?” and Ebony answered, “Well, we have to make sure that the younger ones know what they are doing. We can’t have them screwing up our dances by them just doing whatever. We have to keep them in line.” It was clear that these two knew their roles in the project, yet the group was still flexible enough to accept new members. I saw a brand-new member getting in line with the other dancers.

These descriptions point to some important aspects of this work. Just as in the well-known samba schools in South America that Papert (1993b) used as an example for successful learning cultures, there are multiple opportunities for apprenticeship. In this example, the older members show the younger ones how to participate and structure the activity through their efforts to choreograph the dances and keep the younger members in line. However, in one of the later field-note excerpts the reader will see that this type of top-down mentorship isn’t always the case. Breona, one of the youngest members, is actually the star dancer and the other members learn from and are inspired by her dance moves.

CRITIQUE AND EXPERTISE

The judgments of the quality of dance invite critique—for better or worse—of how successful a particular dance move is or how expert the member is in Krump technique. Video enables youth to immediately review their performances. This next excerpt demonstrates that the younger members have a valuable contribution to the innovation in the activity.

Critique, Expertise, and Self-Confidence. While the younger members were performing, the older ones watched and critiqued, giving opinions or

laughing at the boys who “danced funny” or “looked retarded.” After the song was over they decided to ask one African American girl, named Breona, to participate in the video. She mentioned that she needed to hear a different song and suggested a song by Missy Elliot called “Lose Control.” She was so good; it was no wonder why the guys were so intimidated by her. The other members also acknowledged the younger members who were good dancers. Breona was complimented on her dance moves. She received comments like “dang that girl can dance,” from the older members. Her dance moves were more crisp and fluid than the other two girls’. I was greatly impressed at how talented Breona was. She was way more proficient at dancing and had more confidence than any of the other girls. One of the other girls, Ebony, who was in charge of the choreography for the girls, was very outspoken and seemed like she could dance really well, but when it came down to performing for the music video, she became very self-conscious and seemed to dance poorly on purpose. Ebony was older than Breona, yet because of Breona’s carefree viewpoint she was able to perform with ease.

This excerpt points to the multiple opportunities for innovation—a highly valued contribution in Krump culture. The activity itself is open enough to allow for infinite degrees of innovation both in the filming and in the choice of dance moves—a high ceiling—and yet allows for new members without much experience to be involved as well—a low floor. The structure of several consecutive dances, each only a few minutes in length, allows for members to enter and leave the activity as needed. This feature also allows for multiple entry points, in case it takes the kids a while to warm up to the activity. In addition, the Krump culture, similar to what was found in samba schools, allows for and encourages cross-gender and cross-age participation. The youth are united by their shared goals: the performance and the documentation. Finally, the activity itself is easily expandable from a group of 6–7 youth to a group of 30 youth at times and leads to multiple ways to contribute to the activity.

DIVISION OF LABOR

The Clubhouse dance video activity presents multiple opportunities for youth to draw upon their individual areas of expertise and take on strong leadership roles. In the following field-note excerpt, the division of labor is explored. Several of the youth take on leadership roles, including Dwight and Javan, as the producer and director, respectively. In addition, there are several other roles that youth step up to fill, including the role of DJ (FAFA), makeup artist (Javan), choreographer (Ebony), editor (Kaylee), and dancers (e.g., Breona and several college mentors). Each of these roles is interdependent on the other.

Roles. The dance group included only three girls, all of whom were African American. The rest of the group contained six boys, both African

American and Latino. One of the older members, Javan, took on the role of the director. I talked to Javan earlier, and he said that he did all the planning and face painting. All of the boys in the group had their faces painted with different designs by Javan. Though Javan organized the sequence of events for the music video, each member involved had his or her own role. There was a designated role for each *member*: One was the DJ in charge of the music, another was in charge of recording the video, another was the producer, another the choreographer, another was the editor, and the remainder were dancers.

Although the collaborative activity can take place in the absence of any one member because the leadership is distributed, each member plays an important role in shaping the project. Roles are divided up according to interest and ability. For example, Kaylee's knowledge of the video-editing software facilitated her involvement in the group as the editor.

INSIDERS VS. OUTSIDERS: VIEWS ON AGGRESSION IN THE DANCE CULTURE

Learning to Krump and participating in the dance events requires some basic cultural knowledge and an understanding of the shared importance of the event. Despite being a fairly open group—and this is where a sense of agency comes in when an individual chooses to participate in the dance activity or not—the activity is not necessarily understandable to cultural outsiders. In fact, the aggressive qualities of the dance and the acted battling that sometimes takes place during dance-offs or visual displays of anger can be frightening to outsiders who don't understand the cultural meaning behind these activities. The members themselves share an understanding of the importance of the activity and accept these displays of violence as a form of expression and not of aggression.

In sum, Krumping knowledge is situated and context-specific: Insiders in the activity see the visual displays as countering feelings of oppression while outsiders see it as a form of aggression. While the context varies, this seems to be the case with most collaborative activities. Members join together because of a shared interest while outsiders to the activity see it as deviant or unhealthy. This tension between insiders and outsiders in collaborative activities is highlighted in the following two field-note excerpts, both written by Latino males who were undergraduate mentors at the field site during this same time.

Insider. I was especially surprised when I saw her dancing as if she was calling out one of the members to battle her . . . Breona got right in Dwight's face and pretended to be slashing him and ripping him apart through her battling. This whole idea of women being nice and sweet and not really showing hostility but tranquility was completely false. This young girl was ready to challenge any male who challenged her way of dancing because she knew that she was confident enough to chal-

lunge the boys to dance. At one point I decided to come into the film and relive my youth. I did a few break-dancing moves. The kids seemed to have enjoyed watching me dance because they were cheering me on.

Outsider. One of them asked me if I could dance; I just nodded my head [to signify “no”]. I tried to get Fafa’s [a male member’s] attention but I called him FAT FAT. (O.C. I guess that I misheard his name because Kaylee and her friend laughed at that and repeated what I had said. Fafa seemed embarrassed. He smiled but he wasn’t laughing and he seemed quieter than usual). I then noticed that the kids were dancing. They formed a circle, like in the video. I then saw two members, Daniel and Fafa play fighting. I wasn’t sure what to do at that point, but I noticed that the Clubhouse coordinator looked over, laughed, and remarked, “Those boys are crazy.” Her reaction made me feel that it was OK that they were doing this. I love the fact that they are bringing music into the Clubhouse in this manner, but it makes me feel uncomfortable that they were play fighting. I guess I didn’t say anything because it seemed okay with the Clubhouse coordinator.

The mentor who is characterized as the insider uses terminology specific to the event (e.g., *battling*), participates by dancing (albeit break dancing and not Krumping), and reads Breona’s aggressive gestures as empowering her as a female. By contrast, the mentor who is characterized as an outsider in this activity system is unsure of how to read the social context, relies on cues from an authority figure to know what is and is not appropriate, does not participate in the dance, and mistakenly calls the youth by an insulting version of his rapper name. Surprisingly, this mentor has been involved for over a year at the Clubhouse while the insider mentor is new to the Clubhouse activities.

Ironically, this activity, in contrast with most of the work at the Computer Clubhouse that can sometimes end in frequent feuds and hurt feelings, did not inspire any verbal (or otherwise) fighting among the members. In fact, the dance videos rallied the members and created a sense of community in the space. During the peak of the dance video movement, attendance was at an all-time high, the place was filled with music, and all of the youth were engaged in some aspect of creative production related to Krumping.

While the girls and boys maintained separate dance styles, they were working together toward the same creative ends. The girls in particular were able to regain a sense of control and presence in the Clubhouse activities through dance. In contrast to the misogyny often found in hip-hop cultures, the Krump circles allowed the girls to express physical violence in play form, giving them an acceptable outlet for their anger and aggression, which is often reserved only for males.

THE FLUIDITY OF ROLES

Our observations and analyses of Krumping indicate several distinct features from traditional small-group collaboration, which is the more common form of group

work found in schools (Cohen, 1994). For example, we observed that members assumed multiple roles, and did so fluidly as they shifted from participants to observers to directors to editors and back. At least on the outset, there seemed to be less of a hierarchy based on authority of age, even though some club members pointed out that they needed to make sure that the younger ones knew what they were doing. Instead, fuller forms of participation seemed to derive from the dance performance itself, and so younger members could assume authority they would otherwise be denied in more traditionally organized settings. Most small-group collaborations have roles assigned even if participants cycle through them; here members adopt whichever role is needed and available, such as when they move in and out a circle during their Krumping performances.

In the previous chapters in Part II of this book, we examined the individual explorations of Clubhouse youth. While this is an important aspect of creative constructions, it neglects to describe the larger collaborative work that is taking place in these spaces. While we explored how certain ideas can act like *memes* (Dawkins, 1976), defined as ideas that take on a viral quality, spreading across the Network such as in the Cosmo puppet example found in Chapter 2, here we take a closer look at how collaborative activity can take place within an individual Clubhouse, forming what sociologists call *neo-tribes* (Bennett, 1999). Rather than fixed social groups, neo-tribes are fluid associations of collaborative groups and in this case help to describe the temporal groups that form at the Clubhouse, united, at least temporarily, in a common interest in music or dance. Youths' collaborative work is often influenced by the local context and frequently showcases finely tuned youth leadership skills, as these projects are mostly conceived of and executed by Clubhouse youth, leaving adults on the sidelines. These projects are also often highly innovative, drawing on the latest developments in music, dance, and other forms of media mixing.

What we saw in these dance performances and video productions at the Y.O.U. Inc. Clubhouse connects well to a growing body of work on youth activism, which has demonstrated the extent of political influence that disenfranchised youth can have on effecting social change (Cervone, 2002; Sherman, 2002). More recently this work has focused on youth activism as a context for learning and development (Kirschner, 2007) and has described four distinctive qualities of learning environments in youth activism groups, which map closely onto the Clubhouse environment. These qualities include (1) collective problem solving, (2) youth—adult interaction, (3) exploration of alternative frames for identity, and (4) bridges to academic and civic institutions—all of which overlap with core features of the Clubhouse model. In the case of the collaborative Krump culture, we can see here that youth are able to exercise leadership skills while engaging in twenty-first century-learning skills, such as those in learning to use video documentation for learning. As they do so, they are learning to write and document the stories in ways that can communicate the standpoints and values of their local community to others in distant communities.



Technology, Education—Connections (The TEC Series)

Edited by **YASMIN B. KAFAI, KYLIE A. PEPPLER, AND ROBBIN N. CHAPMAN**

THE COMPUTER CLUBHOUSE

CONSTRUCTIONISM AND CREATIVITY IN YOUTH COMMUNITIES

Forewords by **BARTON J. HIRSCH AND ROSALIND HUDNELL**

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This book is about the Computer Clubhouse—the idea and the place—that inspires youth to think about themselves as competent, creative, and critical learners. So much of the social life of young people has moved online and participation in the digital public has become an essential part of youth identities. The Computer Clubhouse makes an important contribution not just in local urban communities but also as a model for after-school learning environments globally. This model has been uniquely successful scaling up, with over 100 clubhouses thriving worldwide. Showcasing research by scholars and evaluators that have documented and analyzed the international Computer Clubhouse Network, this volume considers the implications of their findings in the context of what it means to prepare youth to meet the goals of the 21st century.

Book Features:

- A successful, scalable model for providing at-risk youth a rich array of media design and computing experiences.
- Diverse examples of media created in the Clubhouse, ranging from digital stories, video games, interface designs, and digital art projects.
- Color photos of life in the Clubhouse, including youth projects.
- Interviews with stakeholders in the Clubhouse Network, from the director to coordinators at various international clubhouses.

"It is difficult to conceive of an after-school setting that would have a greater emphasis on positive youth development. . . . Beyond learning computer programming, young people at the Clubhouses learn marketable skills in product design, project management, teamwork, marketing, and communication. . . . Read [these chapters], appreciate what has already been accomplished, and consider the exciting possibilities for the future."

—From the Foreword by **Barton J. Hirsch**,
Northwestern University, author of *A Place to
Call Home: After-School Programs for Urban Youth*

"As you will read in this book, the impact of the Computer Clubhouse on underserved youth around the world has been far-reaching, long-lasting, and life-changing."

—From the Foreword by
Rosalind Hudnell, Intel Corporation

"Essential reading for anyone concerned with the development and education of contemporary youth. . . . Its lessons go far beyond the Clubhouse."

—**Michael Cole**, author of *The Fifth Dimension:
An After-School Program Built on Diversity*

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