

“You heard me swear but you never heard me!” Negotiating agency in the Pupil

Referral Unit Classroom

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Abstract: This study explores the exercise of student agency in an alternative educational setting in England by considering students’ verbal interactions during an art lesson where they created masks, and in an engineering lesson where they developed model rockets. We build on Rainio’s (2008) operationalisation of student agency by drawing attention to some of the more particular linguistic features which characterise the exercise of agency in immediate classroom situations. Our findings demonstrate that the participating students were responding to, renegotiating or resisting their teacher’s agendas in subtle ways, depending on the contingencies of the moment.

Keywords: Student Agency, Pupil Referral Unit, Classroom Observations

Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) are out-of-school centres which cater for a diverse range of students in the United Kingdom, including those students who have been permanently excluded from school, those who are at risk of permanent exclusion and those who refuse to attend school, are pregnant, or are without a school place. While they are substantially different from mainstream state schools in their staffing and curricular obligations, their main objective is to prepare students to return to mainstream settings by offering additional emotional, behavioural and educational supports (Meo & Parker, 2004). As such, PRUs typically attempt to deliver short-term educational provision with a view to securing longer-term gains. However, the time-compressed nature of this work, together with the complex array of challenges experienced by PRU studentsⁱ often means that there is a tension between students' personal liberties and the wider social obligations of staff in these institutions.

While many scholars have cast a critical eye upon the potentially marginalizing effects of removing students from mainstream schools and placing them within PRUs, few attend to the more immediate aspects of the PRU classroom situation to consider how students there might actively contribute to the flow of classroom instruction and momentarily negotiate forms of agency. Therefore the purpose of the present study is to investigate the extent to which PRU students had opportunities to exercise agency during two lessons where they were involved in making physical artefacts. To this end, the research presented in this article was pursued with the following key question in mind: In what ways did student agency emerge and develop during the observed classroom interactions?

This study arises from a larger research project, which involved critically evaluating an

initiative that aimed to enrich the PRU's pre-existing curriculum by increasing the provision of art activities. For the present purposes, Rainio's (2008) conceptual framework is employed to investigate verbal interactions during an art lesson which involved students in mask-making, and an engineering lesson where students constructed and launched model rockets. However, before setting out the methodological approach which guided our research, we proceed by identifying some of the particular challenges and issues which have been highlighted when attempting to foster student agency within schools in general, within the more specific context of the PRU, and through the pedagogical process of making. Our research findings point to a range of ways in which student agency may be enacted in the classroom and we conclude with some closing thoughts on how educators might reconsider certain widespread assumptions about the role of classroom dialogue and student opposition.

Student agency – from theory to classroom practice

While interest in the role of agency in human learning and development has a long historyⁱⁱ, in recent years, the notion has gained increased popularity as educational researchers have sought to develop a deeper understanding of how students actively contribute to their education (see Arnold & Clarke, 2014; Kangas, Vesterinen, Lipponen, Kopisto, Salo & Krokfors, 2014; Rainio, 2008; Rajala, Martin, & Kumpulainen, 2016; Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Sharma, 2007). The basic concept of student agency encompasses the idea that students are not endlessly manipulable objects who simply submit to school authority. However, beyond this core idea, there is little consensus among scholars of education. In one recent review, for example, Matusov, von Duyke & Kayumova (2016) identify a range of different theoretical tendencies within the field: from those where students are regarded as agentive once they

develop the capacities and motivations to accomplish socially-valued goals, to those where the emphasis is on agency as an authorial process so that it is students' unique contributions and creative innovations that are most prized. However, despite the many variants of agency to be found within the literature, some scholars lament that the notion maintains a rather elusive quality since it rarely inspires explicit operationalisations or systematic analyses, thus leaving the reader to infer the meanings that agency is being given (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Kristiansen, 2014). However, rather than seeing the diversity of approaches to student agency as inherently problematic, scholars drawing from sociocultural and activity theory perspectives argue that a clear articulation of this diversity can help with the development of a more nuanced understanding of the various forms agency might take under a range of different social, cultural and historical circumstances (see Rainio, 2010; Rainio & Hilppö, 2017; Rajala, Martin, and Kumpulainen, 2016). Indeed, sociocultural and activity theory perspectives are particularly fruitful in this regard because rather than treating the individual as the primary unit of analysis and measuring beliefs that enable individuals to make decisions that influence their lives (see Bandura, 2001), activity theory and sociocultural perspectives view agency as a complex, relational process that emerges within a social context (Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro, & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2015; Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2013). From this key conceptual framework, agency has been attached to phenomena such as the skill to collaborate as well as provide and receive help from others (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004), and the capacity to break away from traditional, "taken-for-granted" patterns of activities by challenging and initiating new, alternative practices (Engeström, 1987, 2001).

In an effort to integrate the various different ways of understanding agency within the sociocultural literature, Rainio (2008) developed a detailed analytical method for

systematically analysing the development of individual agency in classroom interaction. She identifies three main forms of agency from pre-existing literature: (a) agency as self-change and as transforming the objective of an activity; (b) agency as becoming a responsible and intentional member of a learning group or a classroom; and (c) agency as resistance and transgression that transforms one's relation to and position in an activity and thus the dominant power relations. Placing these three different forms of agency within a single analytical scheme invites an analysis which attends to the dynamic interplay between them. Indeed, there is no reason to presume that the development of agency is necessarily a stable and harmonious process. Instead, Rainio (2010) advocates a dialectical conceptualisation of agency as this places the human processes of facing and resolving contradictions at the core of human development (see also Rainio & Hilppö, 2017). From this perspective, it becomes important to consider how people struggle with or manage various sources of agency in their daily practices. Indeed, Rainio (2008) points out that even though the development of personal initiative is crucial for students' learning, the need for control and order in classrooms often makes it difficult for teachers to afford students the freedom to develop these sensibilities. In the sections which follow, we will consider how this tension between control and freedom plays out in the literature concerning the institutional practices of PRUs and the pedagogical process of making.

Enacting Agency in the PRU classroom: Exploring the institutional context of the research setting and pedagogical process of making

At the time of writing, government records indicate that there are 351 PRUs in England, catering for 15,669 students, which is approximately 0.002% of the total school population in

England (DfE, 2017). These same records reveal that admissions to PRUs tend to peak at age 15 and that the majority of PRU students are male (72%). In recent years PRUs have been under pressure to raise the standards of their performance as concerns have been expressed in government reports about the outcomes for their students, particularly with respect to academic performance, involvement in crime and job prospects (see Ofsted, 2016; Ofsted, 2011; Taylor, 2012). However, within the UK scholarly literature, the functions of PRUs have frequently been depicted in a rather negative light, as *escape valves* for the pressures on the mainstream schooling system. This is because the rationale for removing certain students (typically those deemed to have emotional and behavioural difficulties) from the routines of regular schooling and placing them within PRUs hinges on the belief that these actions will reduce the risk of disturbance to the academic performance of the remaining students (Lawrence, 2011; McSherry, 2012; Lawrence, 2011; Meo & Parker, 2004, Solomon and Rogers 2001; Vincent & Thomson, 2010).

The marginalising potential of the above process has been decried by scholars such as Carlisle (2011) who argues that it is possible to see permanent exclusion from school as “an authoritarian technique” designed to remove those who “pathologically” do not fit within the mainstream education system (p.314). Furthermore, Thomson (2007) maintains that once students have been removed from a mainstream school, they frequently see their educational options as a stark choice between resisting or complying with school authorities. However, as Thomson warns, neither choice may be perceived by students as affording much capacity to them to exercise agency. This is because continuous resistance to school rules is likely to lead to further removals from full-time education, while compliance can sometimes lead to a form of invisibility. In the latter instance, it is worth noting that some PRU students have pointed out that they experience greater recognition from school staff when they adopt more

disruptive behaviours (see Hamill & Boyd, 2002; Sellman, 2009; Thomson, 2007). Indeed, there is an extensive literature in the fields of sociology and social policy which has long suggested that sub-cultures of students who find classroom climates as excessively regulatory tend to perceive school as a worthless institution, whose norms should be opposed (see Mac an Ghaill, 1988; McRobbie, 1978; Howarth, 2004; Willis, 1977). At the same time many scholars have pointed out that in cases where PRU staff adopted a non-confrontational, human style whereby students were carefully listened to and valued as individuals, students experienced more productive, working relations with teaching staff (see Frankham, Edwards-Kerr, Humphrey & Roberts, 2007; Harris, Vincent, Thomson and Toalster, 2006; Lloyd, Stead and Kendrick, 2003; Munn & Lloyd, 2005).

The classroom settings presented in this article are theoretically interesting because both involve an emphasis on making. Martin (2015) defines making as a “class of activities focused on designing, building, modifying, and/or repurposing material objects, for playful or useful ends, oriented towards making a ‘product’ of some sort that can be used, interacted with, or demonstrated” (pp. 3–4). When such activities take place in the classroom, they are frequently associated with Papert’s (1980) pedagogy of constructionism, which emphasises the active role that students can take in their own learning through direct physical engagement with phenomena and problems in the world (Bevan, 2017). As such, many have been relatively optimistic about the opportunities for students to exercise agency when classroom activities involve making. For example, research has shown that making affords students the capacity to demonstrate their agency through involvement in decision-making processes (Griffin, Rowsell, Winters, Vietgen, McLauchlan, & McQueen-Fuentes, 2017); expressing their thoughts, values and ideas in a variety of different formats (Anderson, 1997;

Barton and Tan, 2010); and by generating a more equitable set of relations through working partnerships (Digiacomio and Gutiérrez, 2015).

Nevertheless, it would be naïve to suggest that the practice of making necessarily affords students a greater level of agency. Indeed, Resnick & Rosenbaum (2013) caution against an over-reliance upon step-by-step, recipe-like fabrication activities in the classroom since persisting with the same activity for a long duration may risk producing a less cognitively demanding and emotionally rich classroom experience. In addition, Adams (2010) argues that although making is frequently associated with factors such as creative expression, social learning and play; rigid assessment regimes constantly threaten to discourage children from taking risks and experimentation. In addition, many critics have pointed out that the increasingly widespread expectation that teachers should work towards predetermined lesson objectives and remain accountable for student outcomes, diminishes the extent to which the latter feel that they can provide opportunities for student-generated creative explorations that go beyond predictable outcomes (Atkinson, 2008; Burnard, 2008; Milbrandt, Felts, Richards, & Abghari, 2004; Rufo, 2012).

Clearly, the pre-existing literature does not offer any definitive answers when it comes to considering the prospects for the pedagogical practice of making to foster student agency within the particular educational context of the PRU. We argue that the inconclusive nature of this literature is symptomatic of a deeper tension within educational practice, that is, the tension between the simultaneous and overlapping requirement for teachers to maintain classroom control while further developing students' independence and creativity. As a consequence, we follow Rainio (2008, 2010) in focusing our efforts on considering how students negotiate these tensions in everyday classroom interaction.

Methodology

Introduction to the research setting

This study took place in a PRU in the North-West of England which provides education for up to 60 students, aged from 11 to 16 years, who have been excluded or referred from mainstream schools. Education, intervention and support is provided for students who often have a history of non-compliance with school rules. Teaching and learning arrangements at the school involve a mix of national curriculumⁱⁱⁱ stipulations, vocational initiatives and extra-curricular activities. Teaching is typically delivered in small groups of between 1 and 10 students and the school employs a relatively large team of ten Teaching Assistants (TAs)^{iv} to give additional support to individual students. Once a week, an entire school day is devoted to a series of extra-curricular, enrichment and vocational activities (e.g., cookery lessons, fitness training, outdoor adventure pursuits, workplace visits). This article focuses on verbal interaction within two such lessons – art and engineering - where Key Stage 3^v (KS3) students constructed ceremonial masks in the former lesson, and model rockets in the latter lesson. In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the ongoing classroom activities, the first author was involved as a participant-observer in both lessons, circling among students and assisting teachers where necessary. Field notes and audio-recordings were made for both lessons, which were delivered in the school between June and July 2014.

The Art Lesson

The art lesson comprised a mask-making workshop which was facilitated by an illustrator who provides art sessions on a freelance basis for schools in the region. The workshop took

part in a large classroom over two hours and was attended by two male students, “Liam” and “Luke” (both aged 14 years) who were accompanied by two experienced TAs who worked full-time at the PRU. During a planning consultation meeting, the visiting artist was informed that the KS3 group had recently visited an aquarium, had created papier maché fish sculptures and had been learning about Brazil in anticipation of the World Cup celebrations. Consequently, she suggested that an art project be delivered around the creation of fish head ceremonial masks which are used by dancers during ritual celebrations within indigenous groups in Brazil. During this session, the participating students designed and constructed large masks using corrugated cardboard and newsprint, which they then decorated using wax pastels.

The Engineering Lesson

The engineering lesson was delivered by an engineering teacher who worked at the school on a part-time basis and was attended by two female TAs and three male students, denoted by the pseudonyms “Rhys”, “Max”, and “Matt” (all aged 13-14 years). The lesson centred around the energy and forces elements of the engineering curriculum and involved students building, adapting and launching their own rockets. The students were given cardboard tubes, foam nose cones, adhesive, decorative stickers and card from which to construct a small model-sized rocket. Once the students had completed their model rockets, they were accompanied outside by teaching staff to test-launch the rockets using two different forms of air pressure. For the first launch, students attached their models to the rims of unsealed plastic bottles and jumped on the main body of these bottles to propel their models into the air. For the second launch, the students used a valve to connect their rockets to a piston-operated pump and used an air pressure gauge to monitor levels of air pressure being

delivered to rocket. When the desired level of air pressure was reached, the students launched the rocket by releasing the valve.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to investigate whether students took opportunities to exercise agency during the two lessons described above, our audio-recorded data was transcribed verbatim and segmented into interactive episodes (i.e., events in the classroom characterised by interactions between two or more participants with clear starting and ending points – these key events are summarised in Figures 1 and 2). Although video recordings would have allowed us to capture aspects of the classroom action that went beyond speech (e.g. gestures, body movements, selection and manipulation of tools etc.), audio-recording was chosen for its potential to act as a less intrusive observation tool^{vi}.

The analysis of transcribed data proceeded from Rainio's (2008) framework for analysing the conditions under which different manifestations of agency arise in verbal classroom interaction. In order to define the possible functions of students' utterances, Rainio distinguishes between six different kinds of student orientation towards classroom action which are detailed in the first two columns of Table 1. Although we acknowledge that choosing to remain passive can be an important means of negotiating agency, such agency is often achieved through silence. Therefore, due to the verbal nature of our key data, we limited the scope of our analysis to dialogue characterised by active forms of classroom participation (Rainio & Hilppö, 2017). Therefore the students' dialogue was colour-coded according to the first five action orientations outlined in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

In order to consider the interplay between the different action orientations within the coded data, the transcribed data was visually inspected and timelines were created for each student to depict how frequently dialogue characterised by each action orientation arose during the different phases of their lessons (for an example, see appendices). Two key patterns were identified from this preliminary exploration of the data. Firstly, it was evident that dialogue coded as deconstructive and resistant tended to reside within close proximity and that the frequency of both kinds of dialogue over the course of the lessons tended to follow highly similar trajectories. Secondly, dialogue coded as responsive, supportive and constructive also tended to reside within close proximity, and the frequency these three kinds of dialogue arose over the course of the lessons, tended to follow generally similar trajectories.

In order to move away from a more fine-grained analysis of the data at the level of utterances towards a more holistic consideration of the data at an episodic level, Rainio's scheme was adapted in line with her original distinction between agency as self-change and transformation, agency as becoming a responsible member of a group, and agency as transgression that transforms one's position in an activity. Therefore, deconstructive and resistant initiatives were considered together, as a "transgressive" mode of agency, i.e., interactions directed towards disrupting the pre-existing classroom order. Responsive and supportive initiatives were likewise considered together as an "affiliative" mode of agency^{vii} i.e., interactions directed towards supporting and sustaining the pre-existing classroom action.

Finally, the “transformative” mode of agency involves interactions with an emphasis upon novelty as students direct their efforts towards introducing new content to the ongoing dialogue. We distinguish the constructive mode from the affiliative mode by seeing the former as having a greater invitational function so that other speakers are being encouraged to depart from pre-existing themes and issues to enter onto new conversational terrain.

In the section which follows, we begin by summarising key findings from our preliminary analysis and then illuminate how students’ negotiate different forms of agency during classroom interactions, by presenting a series of critical incidences which have been characterised as affiliative, transgressive and transformative in form. The denotation of an event as a critical incident signals that the event in question was selected for its potential to act as a stimulus for further reflection on the interpersonal processes surrounding classroom action. The analysing process consisted of selecting the main episodes of the activity under consideration, elaborating upon the manner in which these episodes have unfolded and reflecting upon evidence for the outcomes of participants’ actions and any notable changes in their behaviours (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Thus, rather than separating the transcription of the event from its analytic, the presentation of our analysis follows the tradition of ethnographic “thick description”, that is, the analysis and interpretation of events using commentary to deconstruct the events^{viii}.

INSERT FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

Findings

Comparing Patterns of Student Agency in Art and Engineering

A preliminary analysis of the basic features of the texts revealed that adult talk dominated in both lessons, with student talk making up only 20% of the total dialogue in the art lesson, and 15% of the total dialogue in engineering (percentages calculated using the total number of lines transcribed for each lesson). It also revealed that there were substantial variations between individual students with respect to how frequently their verbal exchanges were coded as manifesting the three different modes of agency (see Figure 3). In both lessons, text coded as affiliative was most frequent while levels of text coded as transgressive were notably higher in engineering than in art. In order to consider potential explanations for variations between the observed lessons, we now turn to a consideration of the verbal exchanges themselves as key events unfolded in each of the lessons.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Critical Incident Analysis

Affiliative Agency

The first stage of the critical incident analysis of the classroom dialogue focused on the affiliative mode of agency, that is, instances of consensus-building through cooperation, and development of common understandings. One of the most notable aspects of the verbal exchanges here was that much of their thematic content and communicative functions spanned beyond the practical demands of making physical artefacts. Indeed, as students worked on their creations, free conversation arose on a wide variety of topics. For example, in the following exchange between Matt and teaching staff during the engineering lesson, the

subject-specific terminology (i.e., “bracing”) used by Matt’s teacher prompts him to take the dialogue in a new direction where he offers insights into his family life:

Teacher: it’s looking secure, but there’s quite a lot of pressure on the rocket launcher, I wonder whether it’s worth bracing it over the top with a strip of paper, you might get away with it Matt, then again, you may well not, and then just throw your rubbish in the bin, nice and tidy

Matt: our Lewis ^{ix}is getting braces soon

TA: your Lewis is?

Matt: getting braces

TA: right. Is he gonna get them coloured braces?

Matt: mmm yeh

Teacher: it’s quite trendy isn’t it to have braces nowadays

Matt: he’s getting red ones

TA: is he? To support his football team?

[general laughter]

Exchanges such as these are particularly noteworthy, because, as Schlee (2008) points out, the context of the classroom frequently serves to constrain the kinds of interaction between participating students and teachers. In particular, classroom activities often operate via informational monologues from teaching staff which, as Schlee (2008) goes on to argue,

often constrains the extent to which more cooperative, facilitative, and affiliative types of discourse can emerge since students have reduced opportunities to speak. However, rather than being confined to the more institutional roles of teacher and student, it is clear that in the exchanges above, the participants are drawing upon wider social identities e.g., family roles, abilities and interests. In fact, Cordella (2004) argues that this broader range of conversational topics can help to draw classroom members closer together because it temporarily reduces the power differentials between them since neither party is assumed to have a greater amount of expertise in matters arising from personal experience. In addition, Stephenson and Deasy (2005) argue that instances such as these constitute a *third space*^x in the classroom since students' can integrate their lived experiences with school learning and make personally meaningful connections to the curriculum.

Where the verbal exchanges between staff and students did centre on the task at hand, the analysis of student dialogue in both lessons saw the gradual emergence of a more collective formulation of the learning tasks. In other words, over the course of both lessons, the language of the students gradually shifted from an almost exclusive deployment of pronouns referring to the individual self (i.e., via the pronoun "I"), towards an increased deployment of forms which suggest a common group identity (i.e., via the pronoun "we"). For example, as Luke and Liam deliberate over the assembly and decoration of the latter's mask, we see that Liam's initial deployment of "I" gives way to the more collective "we" used by the researcher and artist:

Liam: I'm finishing it next week

Luke: nah!

Researcher: Get the structure finished while we have the glue gun, we won't have the glue gun next week

Luke: Liam, it's easy lad, just pull up them bands

Liam: Go ahead

Luke: Just put the band on

Liam: No, coz I want to do the roses as well

Artist: We can do those after

Liam: We're supposed to do seven roses lad

Luke: you don't

Liam: you do

Artist: So right look at me, if we use the full width for the top of the shield, it'll be that big, what do reckon, do you want it that big?

Liam: Eh, we should do it on that card.

Interestingly, we see that once Liam decides he would prefer to complete his mask in the next art lesson, he is quickly confronted with Luke's disapproval which then gives way to team reassurances and directions. Once Luke asserts that assembling the mask will be "easy" and instructs Liam to attach some bands to his shield, Liam swiftly invites him to demonstrate this process. When Liam changes his mind as he wishes to create some rose motifs to adorn his shield, this creates disagreement between the students to which the artist responds by

redirecting Liam's attention to the overall structure of his shield. By taking collective responsibility for the completion of Liam's mask and communicating the various options that are available to him in order to reach completion, the group arrive at a successful compromise by permitting Liam to express his design objectives and working alongside him in order to devise the components he requires. The conditions under which a more collective form of agency is exercised by Liam in the dialogue above is interesting because the "we" voice is not employed in the earliest stages of the exchanges. Rather the "we" voice only emerges at a later point in the interaction to demonstrate that the students in question are members of a collective of people who do things a certain way. The interplay between the "we" and "I" forms is indicative of a process of mutual adjustment before the group can proceed with the task, so in the case of Liam, the group assures him that the basic structure of his mask can be completed without compromising his ability to decorate it within the remaining class time.

Transgressive Agency

Transgressive talk, that is, talk directed towards disrupting the pre-existing classroom order, was found to occur more frequently in the engineering lesson than in the art lesson. This was largely because of the unique nature of Rhys' participation in the former lesson, where on several occasions, his dialogue represented some of the most of direct attempts to challenge and undermine established school rules and norms. In the exchanges below, for example, we see that in his frustration while attempting to attach fins to his model rocket, Rhys is politely cautioned for swearing, but rather than passively submit to the school rules, he protests that his teachers were simply policing his behaviour rather than attending to his needs:

Rhys: Here you are, these fucking things

Teacher: Watch your language please Rhys

Rhys: Ah well you're not listening to me are ya?

Teacher: I didn't hear you to be honest, no

Rhys: That's coz you're just listening to swear words, you heard me swear, but you never heard me

TA: I heard you swear and I'm over here

Rhys: Yeh but you never heard me

TA: I did hear you

Rhys: What did I say then?

TA: I'm not repeating it

Rhys: Without the swear words, what did I say?

While Rhys' teacher admits that she did not hear him, one of the TAs emphasises his use of expletives. Rather than focusing upon this breach of the school rules, Rhys, however, points out the apparent contradiction that while his teachers could "hear" him swear, they had failed to appreciate the substance of what he had to say. While the TA's subsequent failure to respond to Rhys' persistent challenge to recount his message could be considered as a tacit admission of defeat, the engineering teacher quickly takes over and redirects Rhys attention by gently suggesting that he return to the classroom to get some glue in order to repair his rocket. By taking up his teacher's suggestion, Rhys departs from the scene of the conflict in the school yard, thereby bringing an end to this temporary rupture in group relations.

In this case, no clear-cut resolutions to the issues identified by Rhys, were forthcoming. At no point do we see any negotiations around the school's policies on acceptable classroom language. Nor do we witness any apologies from either party. Nevertheless, by offering Rhys assistance and the opportunity to return to the classroom to mend his model rocket, we do see a renewed commitment on behalf of the engineering teacher, to provide students with options and opportunities to enhance their learning. An alternative reading of this situation is that by redirecting Rhys' attention to the task at hand, this teacher is attempting to avoid a further escalation in the conflict. In any event, the analysis demonstrates that the unfolding of student resistance is not always characterised by escalations in conflict, further negotiations or even constructive resolutions – they may also be characterised by diversions, uncertainties and an ongoing sense of ambiguity (see Rainio & Marjanovic-Shane, 2013 for an example of a more decisive transformation of an otherwise ambivalent educational interaction).

Unlike the direct form of confrontation adopted by Rhys above, the remaining type of resistance met by teaching staff in the engineering and art lessons was more frequently characterised by subtle attempts to subvert the classroom order. For example, upon completion of a large facial section of his mask, Luke ceases working on the adjoining body section thereby prompting the artist to amicably request that he add some further colour and texture to it:

Artist: Do that bit mate [*indicates section of the mask*]

Luke: It's too big

Researcher: do what? What you'd do is use the, use *[the oil pastels]* on the side

Artist: just speed it all up a bit

Although Luke initially protests that the cardboard section in question is too large and therefore too demanding for him to continue with, he receives suggestions to apply colour by holding the oil pastel horizontally to get broader coverage and to increase his application-speed. This technical guidance enabled him to promptly resume working on his mask and enabled the artist to turn her attention to assisting Liam. Thus, incidences like these proved much less challenging for staff to redress and opened up new opportunities for learning.

Transformative Agency

The final stage of the critical incident analysis of the classroom dialogue focused on the transformative mode of agency, that is, talk that is directed towards envisaging alternative possibilities and embarking on new courses of action (Haapasaari, Engeström & Kerosuo, 2016). Because with this form of agency, we can expect to see changes in students' general classroom dispositions (i.e., typical or "characteristic" orientations towards classroom tasks (see McCaslin, 2009), we examined the dialogue for evidence of shifts in how students understand and approach classroom tasks. Indeed, our analysis of both lessons revealed quite dramatic transformations in the personal dispositions and learning objectives of students as they partook in the classroom activities. At the outset of the art lesson, for example, Luke declares that his drawing abilities are wanting and he expresses concern that this might lead to a poor performance:

Luke: I'm not really good at drawing, I might mess up at it

In fact, during the initial stages of the lesson, Luke sought much guidance from the artist on the construction and application of colour to his mask. However, as the lesson progresses, we see him engage in more independent deliberations over how he will wear the mask. Upon initiating a discussion on this design challenge with the researcher, he suddenly exclaims his solution before continuing on to consider his next course of action:

Luke: Oh my god, I know, we're gonna, I'm gonna make a belt yeh, like a belt

Researcher: That'd be cool,

Luke: oooh: Yeh but how would you get in it?

Researcher: You'd need a thin strip

Luke: Yeh but how would you get in it then?

Researcher: It might be hard I think your idea is good there because if its' - if its solid enough and what you could do is, if you use support, so if you put it down- I'll show you here, if I put it down there and you glue it there, *[inaudible]* to help

Luke: Support, support

Researcher: yeh

Luke: How do you cut this big piece of cardboard? *[initiates cutting]*

Researcher: Yeh into strips, Yeh that's a great idea

Luke: Just like that and then-

Researcher: Yeh, and then-

Luke: Do that

Researcher: Perfect, yeh

Luke: That's me support unit

As Luke proposes that he construct a belt using corrugated card in order to secure his mask to his lower body, questions arise regarding how he can ensure that this belt remains firmly bonded to the large body section of his mask. When the researcher points out that smaller strips of card can be used to provide additional support in the form of bracing, Luke quickly sets about cutting some cardboard and successfully attaches his belt to the body section of his mask. It is likely that the researcher's deployment of the word "support", a term which Luke repeats himself as he considers his next line of action, triggers him to integrate previously acquired understandings (i.e., the idea of a "support unit" as a load-bearing device) into new, creatively challenging situations. Upon solving this design challenge, Luke persists to create a large blue and green snake-like mask which, on completion, he immediately deems successful:

Luke: There ya are, I'm a genius *[laughs softly]*. Who's taking a picture then?

Luke's invitation to staff to take photographs of his work can be interpreted as a signal of personal attachment to his work since the camera possesses the ability to extend his creation into a format which not only preserves it, but also allows for its redistribution and viewing amongst family and friends.

While Luke's classroom role changes from one which can be likened to an apprentice who works under the direct tutelage of a skilled, professional artist, to that of a more experienced, collaborating problem-solver; Liam's disposition also undergoes dramatic change since he had initially been taken out of the classroom by teaching staff for refusing to turn off a computer game in order to participate in the session. When Liam eventually returns to the lesson, he discusses the mask-making objective with the artist and rather than pursuing a design with a more typical tribal aesthetic (i.e., by employing animal imagery and/or geometric patterns), at the artist's suggestion, Liam decides to create a shield-like structure to be worn in order to support the English football team in the 2014 World cup tournament. Being an avid football fan, Liam commences by working alongside the artist and as he does this, we see that when it comes to verbalising his creative vision for his piece, he moves from a tentative "I can try" to a *commissive* "I'll do":

Artist: are you gonna do some little roses on it in the middle [*of the mask*], the English ones? It's up to you

Researcher: oh yeh

Liam: I can try

Artist: Are you gonna do the lettering?

Researcher: you could do printing

Liam: Yeh I'll do that at the top, at the very top there, where you've got that space

According to speech act theory^{xi}, commissive language is used in situations where the speaker's goal is to indicate a commitment to a specific course of future action. For Sannino (2008) these speech acts are, by their very definition, forms of agentive talk, since the speaker is expressing a clear intention to take action. Of course, if individuals make commitments to action which they later abandon without explanation, they risk being judged as untrustworthy and unreliable. Therefore it is interesting to note that in the case above, Liam not only conveys a general willingness to render some images of roses for his mask, he also explicitly commits to a more definitive plan of action, which sees him carefully producing a series of stylized letters to depict the name of his football team in the top section of his shield. Overall then, it is clear that once the visiting artist aligns the lesson objectives more closely to Liam's own particular interests, he becomes more creatively involved in the task of constructing a mask.

In the engineering lesson too we see transformations in the personal dispositions of students, although these appeared to be more subtle than those that occurred in art. While much of this lesson involved students following procedures in order to ensure that their model rockets would remain intact upon launching, it was evident from the pre-launch inspections that not all students were satisfied with their creations:

Rhys: It's not sticking, they're not sticking. *[look how]* shit that one is.

Matt: It's stupid

Interestingly, however, during the launching phase of the lesson, the students become increasingly competitive, with both Rhys and Matt joyfully declaring that their rockets had travelled the furthest upward distances:

Matt: Mine was the highest *[laughs joyfully]*

TA: yay!

Rhys: Mine was the highest!

TA: That was fantastic!

On one level, the students' assertions here might simply be read as a form of playful banter, a form of competitive discourse typically associated with males (see Messner, 1992; Curry, 1991), rather than as serious appraisals of the performance of their constructions. However, alternatively, it could be argued that together with the jubilation surrounding the success of their rocket launches, the pupils' assertions of victory signals a degree of personal investment in their model rockets, despite their structural weaknesses.

There were also frequent attempts from students to extend beyond the boundaries of the task during the launching phase of the lesson. Once students had made their way outside to the test-launch area on the basketball court, they made several enquiries about whether they could try a number of alternative activities including attempting to launch missiles other than those they had created, launching their rockets at different air pressure levels and in new directions:

Rhys: Can we do a bottle for my next turn?

Teacher: We're gonna try and do a bottle, we dunno if the diameter's correct or not
but we'll eh- we'll give it a go

Although many of the students attempts to extend the learning tasks were couched in the language of permission-seeking (i.e., *Can I do X?*), it is still important to note that such requests still hold potential for enhanced opportunities for learning. For example, in the extract above, we see that Rhys' request to use a bottle as an alternative missile affords his teacher the opportunity to explain that they need to ensure that the diameter of the bottle neck is sufficiently wide to attach it to the air pump valve. Therefore, it can be argued that in these negotiated attempts by students to seek further agency during the task, a dialogical space opens up in which pupils encounter rationales and explanations that they might not otherwise have encountered if they were to simply remain within the confines of the planned lesson.

Discussion and Conclusions

While many scholars have cast a critical eye upon the potentially marginalizing effects of removing students from schools and placing them within PRUs, few have attended to the more immediate aspects of classroom situations in these establishments to consider how students there might actively contribute to their education. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to investigate how two small groups of PRU students negotiated agency during classroom interactions. An adapted version of Rainio's (2008) classificatory scheme was applied to verbal data obtained from an art lesson where students were involved in making

masks, and an engineering lesson where students were involved in constructing model rockets. Our main analysis focused on three different modes through which students exercised agency: the affiliative, transformative and transgressive modes. In this concluding section we will summarise our main empirical findings and consider their implications for teaching practice and future research efforts.

Our preliminary analysis of the verbal data revealed that adult talk dominated in both lessons, with student talk making up only 20% of the total dialogue in art, and 15% of that in engineering. Despite this, our application of Rainio's classificatory scheme revealed substantial variations in how the three different modes of agency were exercised during the two lessons. The most frequent mode of agency to be enacted in both lessons, was the affiliative mode. Indeed, we found that the students' verbal contributions were often marked by considerable personal investments and conversations frequently arose on topics beyond the task at hand. Our analysis also indicated the emergence of a more collective formulation of the learning tasks in both lessons, so that the language of the students gradually shifted from one dominated by forms referring to the individual self, towards one marked by forms suggesting a common group identity. The least frequent mode of agency to be enacted during both lessons was the transgressive mode. However, our analysis noted the important exception of Rhys since his participation in the engineering lesson meant more frequent and direct challenges to the teachers' authority. Resistance from the remaining students in both lessons was scarce and where present, tended to take more indirect forms. We also saw that, in some instances, student opposition was temporarily quelled through diversions rather than resolved to a state of closure, whilst in others it proved quite easy for staff to redress with further technical guidance. Finally, our analysis of the dialogue in both lessons revealed

some noteworthy transformations in the dispositions of the participating students. For example, in the art lesson, Luke's classroom role changes from one which was likened to an apprentice working under the tutelage of a professional artist, to that of a more experienced, collaborating problem-solver; while Liam's initial resistance to participating in the lesson, gives way to more creative involvement in designing and collaborating with others to deliver his own particular response to the mask-making task. Meanwhile, in engineering, we see a more subtle shift from students following predetermined construction procedures, towards attempts to expand beyond the boundaries of the model rocket task by experimenting with a number of alternative launch procedures.

There are a number of limitations underpinning the present research which warrant further reflection. To begin, it is important to acknowledge that there were some substantial variations between individual students with respect to how frequently their verbal contributions manifested each of the three modes of agency. Indeed, the scarcity of verbal contributions from Max stands in marked contrast to that of his peers, and it is likely that there are explanations for this which go beyond the scope of the present investigation of the ongoing classroom dialogue. Moreover, like any small-scale study, the present findings cannot be taken as representative of institutional relations between groups of teachers and students in similar educational environments. Rather, the present findings highlight the dynamics underlying a particular educational setting at a specific point in time and under certain political, economic and material conditions. Indeed, not all lessons in the PRU at the centre of this study involve students designing and building material objects or encourage students to directly engage with the physical world around them. Therefore, future analyses of classroom endeavours such as these would benefit from taking into account how students interact with the things they touch, fabricate and manipulate, as attention to non-verbal acts

such as sharing, repairing, gifting, destroying and discarding, may greatly assist our understanding of how affiliative, transformative and transgressive forms of agency emerge and develop over time. Finally, because the data obtained for this analysis were grounded in singular moments in time (i.e., observations of individual lessons), it was not possible to examine whether the events that were selected for analysis had any longer term impacts. Consequently, future research might usefully explore how perceptions of educational environments, and critical moments in classroom, interact and change over time.

Beyond these methodological issues, it is worth considering the present research findings to assess the overall extent to which the participating students had opportunities to exercise agency during the observed lessons. Certainly, the dominance of adult talk in both the art and engineering lessons staff forces us to consider whether this dominance is indicative of a staff commitment to gently channelling students' energies in directions endorsed by PRU authorities. Indeed, as Matusov, Von Duyke and Kayoumova (2015) contend, even in many progressive educational environments, teachers still retain ultimate control over the endpoints of learning and so student agency tends to be limited to finding creative ways to adjust to these pre-given objectives and conditions. However, there are several reasons why a more optimistic interpretation of our findings is possible. Firstly, we argue that although the numerical data was a useful starting point for the present analysis, it reveals very little about the salience of the verbal events that took place in each lesson. As Clarke, Howley, Resnick and Rosé (2016) point out, even just a few moments of action in the context of discussion can have a significant impact on students' sense of agency. This is because when students participate in classroom dialogue they are presented with opportunities to notice the consequences of their contributions and from here the potential may arise to recognise oneself as having a considerable sense of personal agency. Secondly, our analysis shows that

any singular notion of agency would fail to fully capture the complex nature of student participation in classroom interactions. The unique combination of affiliative, transformative and transgressive language that featured in the engineering and art lessons, points to a range of ways in which human agency may be enacted by students within different educational contexts. Finally, it is worth remembering that the pre-existing literature fails to offer any clear-cut answers when it comes to considering the prospects that PRUs and making activities hold for fostering student agency. As several critics have pointed out, the existing regulatory cultures within schools together with the increasing emphasis upon predetermined lesson objectives and greater teacher accountability, means that any attempt to foster student agency in PRUs through creative activities, is not without its difficulties. As a consequence, we have followed Rainio (2008, 2010) in focusing our efforts on considering how students negotiate these issues in everyday classroom interaction. However, we extend Rainio's original approach by drawing attention to some of the more specific linguistic features which characterise agentive classroom interactions, i.e., personal investment in classroom dialogue, gradual deployment of collective pronouns, the emergence of a more commissive language when planning creative work and negotiated attempts to extend beyond the original boundaries of classroom tasks.

While it might be tempting to offer specific recommendations on how these linguistic resources can be deployed in new educational settings, we exercise caution in translating our findings into any simple solutions for best pedagogical practice. Rather, we believe the present analysis has a greater bearing on educators' capacity to question and reconsider their own basic assumptions, classroom practices as well as the unique circumstances under which these are forged. For example, while student opposition has traditionally been regarded as an indication of a deficit in students' adaption to education (Rajala, Kumpulainen, Rainio,

Hilppö, & Lipponen, 2016), in the examples of verbal transgression presented above, we show that resistance can also help students to avoid becoming passive and uninterested in classroom activities. At the same time, because levels of verbal transgression in both classrooms were generally low, the present analysis calls into question any simple preconception that PRU students are always resistant to schooling. Nevertheless, given that the main objective for any PRU is to prepare students to make a swift return to mainstream settings, we are left to grapple with questions about how student talk of the kind presented here might be received by staff in mainstream school contexts. For example, while it was evident that affiliation was the primary mode through which PRU students enacted agency, in classrooms containing larger groups of students directed by teachers who must work towards national curriculum standards, such talk might be treated as a divergence necessitating teacher intervention to swiftly redirect students back to the task at hand. Furthermore, because affiliative and transgressive talk featured alongside a series of key transformative moments, it is useful to consider whether a particular ecology of agency was emerging in these PRU classrooms whereby students began to experiment and innovate in a space that became more welcoming as it became more known, yet one in which latent and sometimes eruptive conflict continues to be negotiated. Comparing the ways in which different educational interactions enable and constrain student agency opens up many new avenues for future research.

i Much pre-existing research highlights PRU students' negative experiences of mainstream education with poor student-teacher relations featuring prominently within the literature (e.g. Hamill & Boyd, 2002; Hart, 2013; Munn & Lloyd, 2005; Pillay, Dunbar-Krige & Mostert, 2013). In addition, students frequently arrive at PRUs mid-term, are likely to be experiencing

difficulties with their academic work (Yell, Meadows, Drasgow & Shriner, 2009) and have absence rates higher than the mainstream population (Taylor 2012). Furthermore, students from low income families are over-represented in PRUS (DfE, 2017).

ii Davies (1990) traces the interest in agency in the classroom back to the open schooling and de-schooling movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Others go much further back in time to consider the philosophical foundations of the notion. For example, Matusov, von Duyke & Kayumova (2015) consider the role of human agency in Kant's universal rationalism.

iii The National Curriculum was introduced into England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 1988 in order to standardise programmes of study and attainment targets for state primary and secondary schools.

iv The school has a Teacher to TA ratio of 1:1 compared to a 2:1 national average (Ross, 2014)

v Key Stage 3 (commonly abbreviated as KS3) is the legal term for the three years of schooling in maintained schools in England and Wales normally known as Year 7, Year 8 and Year 9, when pupils are aged between 11 and 14 years.

vi See Jordan (2012) for a discussion of the technical challenges and issues in relation to participant anxiety and privacy which can emerge when making video recordings in sensitive environments.

vii We use the term "affiliative" here in order to distinguish our analytical category from Edwards and D'Arcy's "relational agency". Although the notion of affiliative agency comes close to relational agency since both are forged via social bonds and collaborative interactions, it is important to note that relational agency involves a more specific capacity to recognize and use the support of others when engaging in purposeful action.

viii Thick description refers to the detailed account of field experiences in which the researcher makes explicit the patterns of cultural and social relationships and puts them in context (Holloway, 1997).

ix "Our" is a colloquial term used in the North of England to denote a family member.

* Theoretical perspectives on third space are founded on concepts of in-between spaces (Bhabha, 1994) that provide a zone for new interpretations of meaning. Fundamental to these perspectives are understandings of third space as socially produced through discursive and social interactions which allow for alternative sense-making practices that draw on personal experience (see Bhabha, 1994; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999).

xi Speech-act theory is a subfield of pragmatics concerned with the ways in which words can be used not only to present information but also to carry out actions.

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Figure 1

Key Events in the engineering lesson

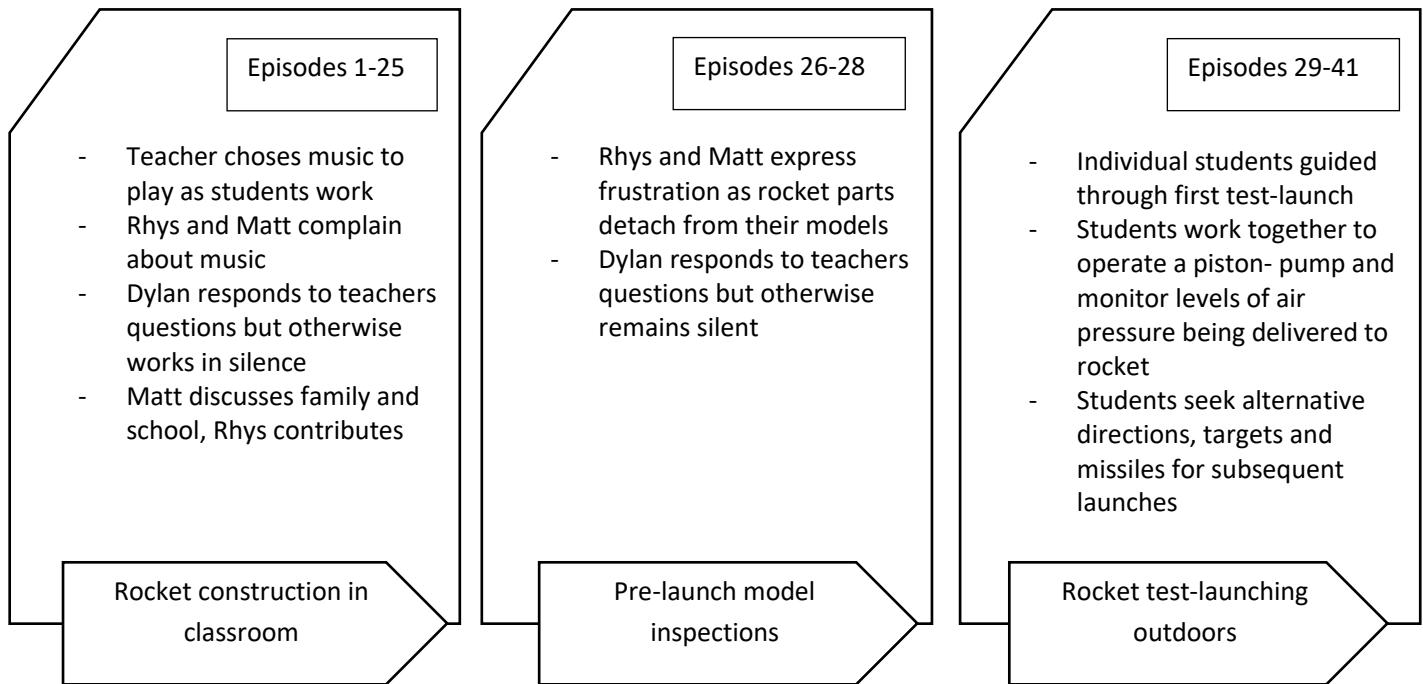


Figure 2

Key Events in the art lesson

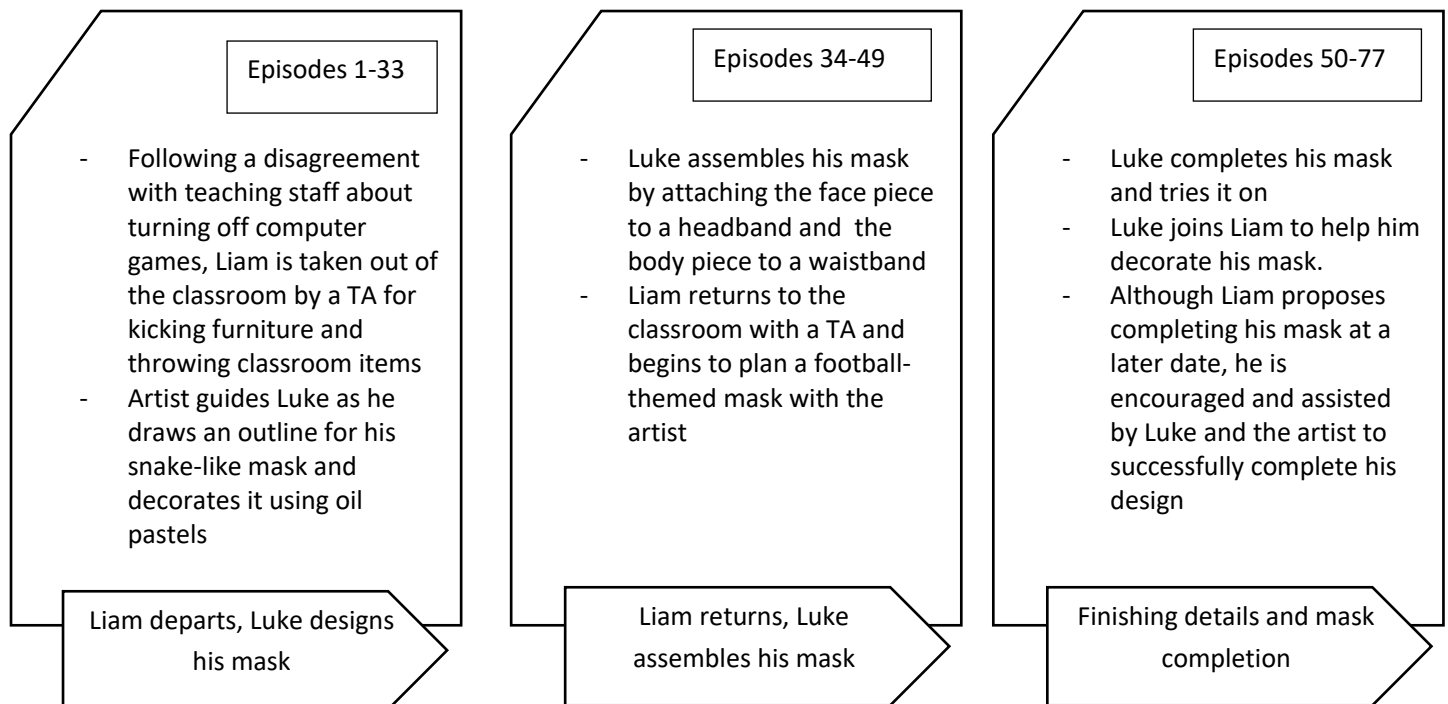


Table 1

Coding Scheme Adapted from Rainio (2008)

Action orientation	Definition	Form of Agency
Responsive	Participating in classroom activity by answering questions, nodding when asked, following instructions	Affiliative
Supportive	Supporting a teacher's/peer's suggestion/act/idea with one's own idea/gesture etc.	
Constructive	Potentially developing or contributing to an event in question. New suggestions, ideas, questions, also gestures and sounds.	Transformative
Deconstructive	Destabilising the emerging activity. Often repositioning oneself in relation to the activity, trying to find a place in it. Actions here are used for distancing oneself from a common task	Transgressive
Resistant	Aiming at resisting the existing order and structure of the play plan. Often against a person in a power position. Also testing and teasing.	
Passive	No sign of participation, just following in the flow of the events or concentrating on something else on the side.	Not applied to the verbal data

Figure 3

Forms of Student Agency in the Art and Engineering Lessons

