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Facilitating Student Documentary Projects Toward 21-Century Literacy and Civic Engagement

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TOWARD 21st-CENTURY LITERACY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: FACILITATING STUDENT DOCUMENTARY PROJECTS

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Students in high-needs schools are growing up in a world awash in digital recording, entertainment, and communication technologies. Though many students are immediately drawn to these technologies, to use them thoughtfully and creatively students need to develop literacies for critically analyzing (reading) and producing (writing) overlapping image, sound, graphic, and print-based texts. The great majority of students in high-needs schools live in impoverished communities hit hard by the recession, and these social and economic conditions often have a significant negative impact on their learning (Eckholm, 2009; Meier, 2009). The high poverty, dropout, and unemployment rates that shape their schools, communities, and life opportunities are well documented (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009; O'Conner & Hilliard, 2009; Noguera, 2009; Luo, 2009).

In spite of those conditions or perhaps *because* of them, I would argue that schools use the social problems their students face as learning opportunities and use the teaching of 21st-century digital literacy skills to foster students' active community engagement. Teaching for both critical media literacy and democratic citizenship requires an integrated multilevel approach. In this process, students develop fluency across multiple literacies, apply newly acquired skills to create media projects, and build a sense

of agency (Goodman, 2003). The goal is to enable them to challenge the institutions and public policies that negatively impact their schools, families, and communities.

While this approach may be demanding for both student and teacher, case studies of apprenticed learning programs in out-of-school settings (Halpern, 2008) provide models and show powerful outcomes from social-issue youth media projects. Youth video, radio, and magazine programs operating across the country give young people a voice and engage them in social justice issues; funders also report that such programs both help young people relate to adults and peers in more positive ways and improve basic literacy skills—reading, writing, and communication—that can boost academic achievement and strengthen the ability to transition successfully into adulthood (Stuart Foundation, 2006; Investing in Youth Media, 2006).

The challenge then for teachers is to bring the promising practices of community-based youth media programs into high-needs school settings; to create a "space of action"—as Greene (1988) has called it—outside the taken-for-granted givens of the system. Within this space, teachers can help repair and restore their students' self-image and sense of agency as active and critical learners. Teachers must make the case to principals that such an alternative approach is transformative and will increase student engagement and meet new 21st-century literacy Common Core State Standards.

Unlike more traditional teacher-centered, textbook-based methods, teaching students to plan, research, shoot, edit, and present documentaries improves critical thinking and literacy skills because they are practiced in a social setting and situated in the real-world context of a video project. Students work on these skills because they see a

purpose for them and care enough to make that effort. They become more than interested.

They become immersed; or as Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described it, they find pleasure in

their work and fall into the "flow" of it.

Preparing teachers to engage their students in video inquiry projects requires

some technical facility in video making. More importantly, it requires a knowledge of a

pedagogical method and a methodology. That is, teachers need to learn a set of practices

that they will enact in the classroom as well as the values and principles that animate

those practices. Preservice teachers generally face an additional set of challenges, since

they first need to develop basic classroom management techniques before feeling

confident in using inquiry-project-based strategies.

I will discuss three of those core principles by examining excerpts from a 14-

minute video project that students produced in a New York City middle school.[1] While

the themes of student inquiry projects vary, these excerpts represent common elements

that teachers can help their students incorporate across the video inquiry and production

process.

Democratizing the Production of Knowledge

A video documentary project democratizes the traditional process of producing

and distributing knowledge in schools in four important ways. First, in choosing their

own topic, students bring a question, event, or problem from their life into school as a

valid subject of study. Second, this empowers the student producers and their school

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[1] This student documentary and other projects described in this article were facilitated by teachers who received inservice professional development and weekly on-site coaching from the Educational Video Center, of which the author is founder and executive director.

peers to reference their lived experiences as legitimate sources of information and storytelling and, accordingly, to speak as expert authorities on their documentary subject. Third, students pose questions to adult experts (e.g., police officers, judges, principals, or scholars)—who, outside this camera-mediated interaction, would have higher status and power over them—and can then appropriate and edit these comments alongside their own. Fourth, the students can translate information they gather from traditional print-based sources—such as books, newspapers, magazines, and Web sites—into graphic and verbal modes of communication—such as quotes that move across the screen or spoken narration—to make that information more accessible to broader audiences.

Through in-depth video interviews with their peers, students transform private experiences into publicly shared reflections with multiple perspectives. For example, speaking in his group's video (I Color: School and Racism, 2007), here is what one middle school student had to say about racial and ethnic stereotypes:

> During school, like, there is many people that make fun of my race. And, because I'm Mexican. And I don't care what they say. But like, for me to defend myself, I use the same thing…It provokes me when they say a joke and somebody else laughs. So I have to say it back. 'Cause I don't want to feel left out.

The student's story of humiliation and retaliation is validated and framed in the video by another expert, Pedro Noguera, an urban sociologist from NYU who is also a Latino:

> Many times, just because you are a male and black or brown I think you experience stereotypes. People will make assumptions that you are, say, a

troublemaker. Or that you might be the kind of person who would do something

wrong. So I experience that too. Yeah. Going into stores and have people assume

that I'm a shoplifter, or something like that.

Finally, the students expand the frame even further, connecting both stories to the

national phenomenon of bias in television news reporting by using the following on-

screen graphic: "The National Association of Hispanic Journalists found that only 1% of

nearly 12,000 stories aired yearly on evening news focus on Latinos. Roughly 80%

portray them negatively."

Developing a Sense of Moral Agency

In his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), DuBois writes about the

phenomenon of double consciousness:

. . .this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of

measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused

contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro;

two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in

one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn

asunder. (p. 3)

Extending DuBois's race-based notion of double consciousness, we can

imagine the struggle of the low income students of color described in the Alliance

for Excellent Education's achievement gap report (2009) to reconcile the

perception they have of themselves with the image that the dominant social

institutions have of them as they are tested, labeled, tracked, punished, and

medicated. Negative perceptions of low income youth of color, particularly black

males, as "problem students" and "slow learners," are more than privately held

attitudes; they become part of social and public institutional practice. Research

has shown that:

· children of color are far more likely to be subjected to metal

detector searches and to attend schools with permanent metal

detectors than nonminority middle class students are (Mukherjee,

2007, p. 20);

· in comparison with middle class children, children on Medicaid

are given antipsychotic drugs four times as often and are given

more powerful medication for less severe conditions (Wilson,

2009);

· in proportion to their enrollment in New York State schools in the

2004-2005 school year, black male students were accepted to

Gifted and Talented programs at approximately one-fifth the rate of

white male students and were expelled from school nearly four

times as often as white male students were (Dillon, 2009).

In the face of such social marginalization, becoming engaged in community

documentary projects can develop students' sense of efficacy and moral agency. This can

occur in two ways: first, when students research solutions to pressing problems, such as

racial and ethnic stereotyping in school and in the media, they participate in a public

dialogue. Creating real work for real audiences in their school and in their world, they are actively contributing to the collective good and well-being of the broader community. Second, by interviewing local leaders such as Noguera, and learning about organizations such as the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, students come to see adults as possible role models and allies. They meet others who share their experiences and are actively working to address problems of poverty, racism, and other out-of-school social obstacles that are typically rendered invisible by the school curriculum and the culture of testing.

Engaging in Social Practice of Multiple Literacies

Schools have traditionally taught literacy as an individual cognitive process involving the ability to decode text (reading) and to code language in visual form (writing). As Gee (2003) describes it, "In school, words and meanings usually float free of material conditions and embodied actions. They take on only general, so-called decontextualized meanings..." (p.86). From a social linguistic perspective, "Literacy practices are almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values, and beliefs" (Gee, 1996, p. 41).

When they are creating video documentaries, students are organically engaged in a contextualized social practice through which they learn to use multiple literacies to change the way the world around them is represented and interpreted. They not only conduct interviews and research a subject they have chosen, based on their own lived

experiences (for example, stereotypes in the media, bullying in school, or teen sexuality),

but also have the social space to think, act, and become social journalists.

Students who struggle to communicate through the written word are not excluded

from this process. In fact, they flourish when given multiple access points in the

collaborative process of media production, whether as camera operator, interviewer,

audio composer, or editor. Telling a story with a beginning, middle, and end; crafting a

message for an unknown audience; editing and revising their work through group critique

sessions—these are all transferable literacy skills built through social practice.

This deep learning and language development occurs not only because of multi-

modal communication but also because of the different kinds of sources students use to

tell their stories and make their arguments. As noted, in the *I Color* video segments

students gathered stories about ordinary, concrete school experiences from their peers.

They included additional statements from adult experts who connected their personal

experiences—for example, going to the store and being suspected of shoplifting—to the

broader social phenomenon of racial profiling. The students built on this story-based

information as a cognitive scaffold and used statistics, as they would in a research paper,

to connect that information to the more abstract idea of the news media as a system that

can use stereotypes to misrepresent people—in this case, Latinos.

This scaffolding process evokes Vygotsky's (1986) belief that everyday or

"spontaneous" concepts "clear the way" for more abstract, systemic, or "scientific" ones:

The development of a spontaneous concept must have reached a certain

level for the child to be able to absorb a related scientific concept. For

example, historical concepts can begin to develop only when the child's everyday concept of the past is sufficiently differentiated—when his own life and the life of those around him can be fitted into the elementary generalization 'in the past and now'; his geographic and sociological concepts must grow out of the simple schema 'here and elsewhere.' In working its slow way upward, an everyday concept clears a path for the scientific concepts and its downward development. (p. 194)

Community of Practitioners

One of the best ways for teachers to incorporate the principles and practices of student documentary projects into their repertoires is to experience them for themselves as learners, and then reflect on their learning within a community of practitioners. Each summer, teachers gather for weeklong institutes at the facilities of the Educational Video Center (EVC), a media education organization based in New York City, and work there collaboratively to plan, research, and produce their own short video projects. Each day they reflect on their experiences, discuss the facilitation strategies that the EVC staff developers model, and review the techniques they would use with their own students.

 In the workshop, teachers go through the same process that their students will experience in the classroom. They discuss what the focus of their investigation will be, take risks using new technology and interviewing strangers, and argue with each other over the selection, order, and meaning conveyed by the footage they are editing. They change their minds over the direction of their project; become consumed by the question

they are addressing; work long hours to meet a deadline; and bond as they create and share their work. In connecting the process of composing a documentary to writing an essay, teacher participants learn how such a video project also calls for a guiding theme, research, argumentation, sense of audience, editing, and revision. Teachers see how making a documentary is a strategy for creating civic engagement, bringing students out of the classroom to critically address the world and its problems.

Key Stages in the Project

Over the course of the weeklong institute, participants experience key stages in the process of planning, production, and reflection, through which they will then facilitate their students' work in school, with on-site coaching from EVC staff. The following are snapshots of some activities drawn from EVC's "Youth Powered Video" curriculum (Baudenbacher & Goodman, 2006).

Topic Selection

Teachers begin by brainstorming subjects for their group documentary inquiry in response to these prompts: What issues or problems are of greatest concern to you right now? What issue or topics do you want to know more about? How might the community be helped by a project exploring this issue or problem?

After questioning the group, clarifying some of their ideas, and eliminating and combining others, the facilitator uses the Graffiti Board activity to help them develop their ideas further. The remaining topics are written on sheets of newsprint, and the sheets are taped up around the room. Teachers then jot down their thoughts in response to these

questions: Why would this topic make a good documentary? What questions would you like this documentary to answer and who would you interview?

This experience models for teachers how inclusive, iterative, and reflective the process is. Empowering students to deliberate and choose the subject of their inquiry shows teachers how to democratize the relations of power in their classroom while still maintaining control as group leader and facilitator. It also changes the class dynamic from a test-based exercise to a more authentic real-world experience, introducing the possibility of moral agency with such questions as: "What issues or problems are of greatest concern to you?" and "How might the community be helped?"

Interviews

Once the main subject for their inquiry has been chosen, the teachers generate ideas regarding who would be the best interview subjects and what questions they need to ask them. For their students, the process of finding interview subjects will create "real world" teachable moments of immense value. As a ninth-grade student video class learned when they invited experts to be interviewed for their documentary on teenage sexuality, using proper spelling, grammar, and professional discourse could all make a difference in the responses they received. For the student who explained that he had never "written messages to companies before," the outcome was tangible, immediate, and tremendously rewarding. He sent an e-mail request to a professor of family health, who responded within minutes, agreeing to the interview. As a result, two new worlds of information opened for him: the virtual world of e-mail as a source of professional communication and the social world of science, housed in the cloistered university

hospital, only a few blocks from their Washington Heights school, where the students later conducted their interview.

Most teachers will already know the basic elements of interviewing—such as understanding the differences between open-ended and closed-ended questions, playing devil's advocate, and asking clarifying questions—that they will teach their students. However, since teachers will not necessarily have had the actual experience of interviewing someone, it is useful for them to role-play an interview, generate a list of interview do's and don'ts, and discuss basic strategies—such as asking general questions before moving to more specific ones, taking background context into account, dealing with problems that arise, and considering possible solutions to them.

After the teachers conduct interviews, the facilitators model using journals and group discussions to reflect on their experience. Invariably, participants write about the energy and excitement they felt going "out on a shoot"; the team building that took place; the mistakes that were made; the engaging stories they heard; the new information they gathered; the new questions that arose; and the unpredictable process of following an authentic inquiry where everyone has questions but no one has the answers. As one teacher described it, "There is a plan, but not a script…. This curriculum does not have an answer key in the back" (Fauntleroy, 2009, p. 2)

Preparing to Edit

Reviewing the footage that has been gathered, the teachers learn both the technical and the compositional process of editing. They make notes on which images, sounds, and sound bites are most usable for their project. This requires critical viewing,

listening, and analytical skills. In searching for the best nugget from an interview, they first need to agree on what makes a strong quote. They may decide that such a quote supports a claim with convincing evidence, teaches the audience something new about the topic, makes the viewer think, is as concise as possible, connects with other parts of the documentary, and/or is visually interesting. The critical thinking that this process requires of students as producers can also help them, as readers, to identify the main ideas in articles and other print-based sources of information.

Once the footage is logged and the best quotes are highlighted, the group develops an edit plan to arrange the scenes in order along with other material they have or still need to gather, such as narration, photos, graphics, and music. Coming to consensus on a collaborative vision for their project develops a stronger documentary because the end product includes multiple voices and perspectives. Such a process also requires strong group facilitation. As one summer institute participant reflected:

> The thing that I learned this week about myself is that collaboration is a real challenge for me…it made me feel more empathetic to my students about how hard that can be…And so I really struggled when we were collaborating to figure out when it was time to speak up…and when it was time to elicit other people's thoughts. I think it's the same when you're working with students and when you're in the role of facilitating.
> (Fauntleroy, 2009, p. 1)

Promising Practices

Facilitating student documentary projects requires that teachers develop a range of technical, artistic, critical literacy, and group-building skills. Teacher rubrics of promising practice include ensuring that all students contribute to discussions and decision making; use the community as a source of knowledge and information; connect personal experiences to social concerns; use multiple modes of literacy in their daily work; develop critical questions to guide their inquiry; revise their work and reflect on their learning; and use their video to inspire community dialogue and action.

Teachers can surely develop and refine such practices with time and experience. The overarching values are what matter most: a belief that democratizing teacher-student relations of power in the classroom will inspire students to become active constructors of knowledge; a trust in students' collective capacity to use their new skills and knowledge as moral agents of community change and well-being; and a conviction that providing students the social space and purpose to develop multiple literacies makes it possible for them to combine documentary image, sound, and text to speak to audiences with power and eloquence. New teachers in high-needs schools can most powerfully inspire their students not by spending class time on more test preparation in search of the narrowly defined easy answers, but by creating a "space of action" for them to pose their own questions and collectively, critically, and creatively search for the hard answers.

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