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Congregating to create for social change: Urban youth media production and sense of community

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Abstract

This case study explored how adolescents were empowered through after school media production activities and, in the process, re-imagined themselves as active and engaged citizens within their community. Through analyzing interviews, participant observations, and media artifacts of 14 participants (aged 15-19) over a period of 18 months, three main themes emerged from the triangulation of data: (1) sociocultural capital through group ownership; (2) safe space for creative expression; and (3) developing a sense of community with diverse voices. These young people exercised their collective voice toward pro-social actions by writing and producing their stories and showcasing their works at community screenings. They hoped that their videos would promote individual and community transformations. Building on youth development, community psychology, and media literacy frameworks, this article discusses educational implications like advocating for the power of youth media production to bridge participants' personal and private artistry to public and political statements.

Keywords

video production; youth media; empowerment; social capital; qualitative; youth development

Mainstream media, which typically perpetuate dominant discourses and representations (Carpentier, Lie, and Servaes 2003), can engineer and promote subjectively skewed images of such vulnerable communities as urban youth and minorities of color. Growing numbers of alternative youth media communities offer greater local access to all levels of media-making, giving voice to disadvantaged viewpoints and honoring the diversity inherent in local communities (Charmaraman 2008, 2010; Halleck 2002; Hull and Katz 2006; Soep and Chávez 2005). In recognition of the hegemonic effects that mainstream media can have on young people, I conducted a case study of a community-based youth media program designed to give voice and empowerment to young people through hands-on production and opportunities for distribution in the local community and broadcast television.

Community media is oriented toward “giving voice to various...social movements, minorities, and sub/counter-cultures, and the emphasis on self-representation can result in a more diverse content, signifying the multitude of societal voices” (Carpentier, Lie, and Servaes 2003, 57). Youth media programs teach collaborative assembly of images, music, and text to create digital media, reflecting various ways that young people are gaining access to social technologies to interact with local communities (Hull and Katz 2006). This especially benefits disenfranchised urban minority youth who often confront issues of prejudice and public distrust, and have limited resources and social capital to combat

negative stereotypes perpetuated as cultural representations on and off camera (Charmaraman 2008; Hall 1997).

Sociocultural capital and asset-based youth organizations

Social capital has been conceptualized as acquiring resources by possessing a durable network of relationships (Bourdieu 1986), as embedded social structures that assist individuals within them (Coleman 1988), and “features of social organizations, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 2000, 35-36). Cultural capital pertains to knowledge and skills that offer advantages, a higher status, and greater expectations (Bourdieu 1986). In resource-poor communities, young people may have particular difficulties finding opportunities to feel valued and accepted as engaged citizens (Kegler et al. 2005; Swisher and Whitlock 2004). This makes youth development programs vital for harnessing young people’s strengths and increase the sociocultural capital of a community’s younger residents.

Youth organizations that are effective in supporting positive development tend to give “visible and ongoing voice to a conception of youth as a resource to be developed and as persons of value to themselves and society” (McLaughlin 1993, 59). *Media*-related after-school programs often move beyond the older model of prevention and protection (e.g. deficit-based) to one of developing young people as citizens, decision-makers, and valuable assets to their communities by incorporating a more holistic empowerment approach to addressing the needs of teenagers (Goodman 2003). This empowerment is believed to increase the potential for people to control their own lives, find agency and willingness to democratically participate in one’s local community (Rappaport 1987). According to Halleck (2002), active community *media* participation can be a source of empowerment for youth to proactively represent themselves. Cultural protest against hegemonic media practices (e.g. adult gatekeepers to cultural knowledge and media resources) attempts to reassign voice and power of representation to young participants in an increasing number of youth media programs, thereby offering an opportunity to gain social capital (Goldman, Booker, and McDermott 2008).

Gaps in youth media production literature

According to Kafai and Peppler (2011), media literacy education has been historically focused on critiquing dominant media ideologies and has subordinated the creative potential of media production. They contend that surprisingly little academic research has focused on youths’ creative media production outside of classroom contexts. The current study is framed to highlight Sefton-Green’s (2006) observation that media education has made an important shift from studying harmful media effects on impressionable audiences to empowering participants within a media culture.

There have been relatively few studies on the role of media production to encourage youth to engage and reflect on larger social issues in the world and the potential impact they have on it (Goldfarb 2002). Willett (2009) contends that despite the vast availability of home video technology to the average consumer, almost no studies examine how making videos impacts new forms of cultural expression and exchange, transforming what it means to be an authority in our society. In-depth studies of the effects of active engagement with media and video technologies on young people’s sense of community, social capital, or empowerment are rare (Burnett 1996; McLeod 2000). One exception is an ethnographic study by Dunsmore and Lagos (2008) who found high levels of student awareness and interest in engaging with community members about social issues through video production, which had not been fully documented through prior conventional survey measures.

The purpose of this study is to showcase overlapping theoretical connections between youth development, community psychology, and media literacy through a case study of how one asset-based youth media production program empowers its participants to produce works that communicate sociopolitical messages.

Specifically, this study explored the following research questions:

1. Within a youth media program, what are young people's motivations and intentions to create their stories through video?
2. How does creating video affect their sense of community and desire for social change?

Research design

I gained access to a community-based youth media program in the Oakland area as an evaluator on a short-term, volunteer basis, having been invited by the director after a lecture I had given at a local media literacy training workshop for K-12 teachers. In this article, I focus on an in-depth case study of the program rather than the quantitative evaluation. I utilized participant observation, interviews, and artifact review that aimed for a full, collaborative description, allowing multiple voices to be heard, while understanding process, meaning, and relationships (Stewart 2000). Instead of attempting to generalize about all youth media programs, the actual business of case study is particularization, not generalization -- in other words, acquainting ourselves with a particular case with great depth rather than distinguishing it from other cases (Stake 1995).

Setting and participants

Through foundation grants, in-kind resources from a local high school, and teaming up with local media-based community partners, Youthscapeⁱ was founded in 2001 to develop media production classes designed to tap into youth voice through music and video. The youth development goals as articulated by the program coordinators included an adult-mentored and youth apprenticeship model for (a) communication skills, e.g. interacting with a world larger than the confines of their neighborhoods; (b) critical thinking skills, e.g. challenging dominant viewpoints; (c) personal expression, e.g. telling a digital story about social or political beliefs; and (d) good work ethics, e.g. collaboration, leadership, and persistence.

The completed projects of the video apprenticeship program included fictional videos, documentaries, and public service announcements that were broadcasted on local television (e.g. KQED, KDOL-TV), radio stations (e.g. Youth Radio), and at community screenings, art galleries, and film festivals. Program staff recruited youth through word of mouth, web-based flyer, and presentations at local schools. Students from disadvantaged, minority backgrounds were given priority, though final selection of each cohort was determined so that the program would be balanced in terms of gender, culture, and experience level. Training was given in media literacy, Adobe Photoshop, Final Cut Pro, and Macromedia Dreamweaver in order to produce live action videos, still sequences, or animated creations.

The 14 video students who participated in this case study were diverse in terms of (a) race/ethnicity (31% Asian American, 25% African American, 20% Latino/Chicano, and 6% Native American, Caucasian, Middle Eastern, or of mixed heritage), (b) gender (42% female), and (c) school (4 different high schools in the Oakland-East Bay area). Average parental income was reported at \$45,000 (below the county median of \$55,946), though household income levels ranged from about poverty level to middle incomes. Participants

ⁱAll names of people and organizations have been changed to protect privacy.

came from a wide range of academic backgrounds with self-reported GPA ranging from 1.5 to 3.9. About half reported that they had considered dropping out of school, citing “learning disabilities,” “negative energy,” and how the “curriculum fails students of color.” In terms of family educational history, about two-thirds of parents had attended college, while one-third had not completed high school. The group consisted of 10th-12th graders and the average age was 16, ranging from 15-19.

Data collection and analysis

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notions of legitimate peripheral participation were lenses through which I observed the sociocultural practices of apprenticeship within this particular community. I became a participant observer of how new apprentices become acquainted with the vocabulary, responsibilities, and organizing principles within this youth media community of practice. Over a span of 18 months, I observed participants bimonthly for one to three hours at a time. These observations entailed attending afterschool sessions (held Monday through Friday), weekend video production shootings at different locations around town, public screenings of student works, staff development meetings, and travelling on an out-of-state field trip. I made both micro and macro-level observations and analyzed descriptive and reflective field notes to generate overarching themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The cyclical process of video production for each project was coded for leadership structure, organization, collaboration, and constructive feedback. My analysis of the program culture included artifacts such as articles written about the organization, their website, scripts, classroom writing exercises, videos and any other related materials that provided a window into the program’s relationship with youth development. Video projects were coded for identity of characters, underlying social messages, and dissemination to the broader community.

In addition to informal conversations with participants throughout the year, I interviewed students individually towards the end of the school year for about 30 minutes. Framed around themes that emerged from field notes, interview questions probed participants’ reasons for joining the program, group collaboration on creative and logistical decisions, and social messages youth wanted to convey through their videos. These interviews were videotaped, transcribed, and inductively coded into themes and categories (Miles and Huberman 1994) related to (a) motivations, intentions, and procedures behind project development and (b) collective identity and ideas about social change. Three main themes emerged from the triangulation of these data: (1) sociocultural capital through group ownership, (2) safe space for creative expression of social capital, and (3) development of a sense of community while celebrating diversity.

Theme 1: Sociocultural capital through group ownership

Youthscapes was structured such that there were recurring and overlapping cycles of media production as the participants worked on developing their own work while also being integral to the production of other projects. In the fall, they spent the majority of their time in pre-production mode, preparing for a spring semester filled with production and editing in time for a year-end screening. In contrast to fears that youth media programs are ultimately adult-instigated and controlled endeavors (Fleetwood 2005), participants at Youthscapes were trained to rely on peer-mediated group processes with Sam, the program coordinator (who was an MFA graduate in cinema) facilitating their ideas, skills development, and access to equipment and resources. Though some pieces were commissioned by local organizations or were based on planned themes for entry into competitions, many video ideas were initiated by youth and were developed through a collaborative process of “workshopping” or when the participants’ developing “voice” was initially “broadcast” informally within the program for internal feedback. For instance, once participants

independently formulated their ideas and reflected on social messages they wanted to convey, Sam and fellow peers were pivotal in shaping the direction of scripts in a number of ways, from plot development, to forecasting the appropriate tone, to casting and rehearsing of actors.

Though there were many opportunities to provide input during project development, the director of each project was understood by the group as the most invested in the overall outcome of the piece and would often perform multiple key roles, e.g. writer, artistic director, editor. In this sense participants made incremental progress toward gaining a sense of efficacy in defined and integrated functions within the program, which Rappaport (1987) characterizes as developing a sense of empowerment and active involvement within a community. Eighteen-year old Filipino student, Pedro summed up his involvement in the multiple stages that enacted the professional standard of video-making:

It felt really good to just be in a planning meeting and a production meeting and to see a project gestate from idea to pre-production to storyboarding to location scouting to actual production to post-production. You got to go through this whole process. You sort of get a whole professional outlook on how to do moviemaking.

The assignment of roles and eventual “production credit” given to each person helped generate a sense of group ownership and a media-based opportunity for self-directed, peer-based learning, as articulated by the youth: “We were switching it up so that everybody has a chance to do the directing, camera work, everything.” Rheingold (2008) observed that going from privately celebrating unique “voices” and personal expression to becoming engaged with society as citizens marks the process from a private to a more public voice. Though at times there were disagreements around the creative or technical direction of a piece, the group would work it out internally in order to produce a cohesive project for a public audience. Heather, a Japanese/Caucasian 12th-grader recalled the leadership process of directing as well as coordinating people as a project manager:

After writing down basic ideas, then I had to find my actors and get them on location... The production process definitely made me look at how I manage my time a little bit more. I went in with a pretty clear vision and there were a few bumps in the road and I just had to get over that. But it wasn't that hard -- I had a lot of support. I sort of surrounded myself with people who I loved working with and people I knew would support me no matter what and help me get my project done. That's what helped me.

As in Heather's example above, the process of collaboration began with self-reflection and the need to express one's point of view while directing a team toward producing that intended idea. Meanwhile, each member helped to support the leader and increase the group's potential for successful task completion. Participants were given opportunities to learn multiple roles and occupy positions of power and creativity, thereby increasing social capital through both individual and group responsibility.

During perhaps the most time-consuming and important stage of the video-making process, after the cameras stop rolling and everyone goes home, the editor recreated the final story by finding sequences that worked, cutting out unusable retakes, and putting them in the right order. This artistic decision-making process of connecting multimodal (e.g. visual and audio) sign systems to convey an editor's design (Jewitt and Kress 2003; Peppler 2010) was observed during this editing stage of the video-making journey. With each round of notes from multiple perspectives, the cycle of media production would loop back to the editing stage again with the knowledge that videos were working drafts, as Victor recalled in his interview:

There's a lot of collaboration. When you edit a piece, you get feedback, you let other people watch it -- your crewmembers. You get feedback and then you alter it. Maybe they'll say that should be here or maybe it'll look a little bit better over there or I don't quite understand that part. You kind of alter it to make it make more sense, to make it more smooth, to get the point across better.

Eraut (1995) demonstrated that when members of a group work collaboratively and feel responsible for the outcome of the product, they attain group ownership, thereby increasing their sociocultural capital. The most successful group collaborations involved the stimulation of each other's ideas within the group and being mutually sensitive to one another's diverse perspectives, which was illustrated by this quote below from Manuel:

I learned that I'm capable of making a short film. I learned that being creative isn't just something you do on your own -- that it takes other people a lot of time to improve something creatively.

Generating cultural media capital at the Sundance Film Festival—As part of their on-going training, the participants attended local youth media screenings throughout the year, and had the rare opportunity to attend the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, as part of a nationwide youth media contingent. In the fall, they were instructed on how to write grants, thereby building economic capital to attend the festival in January. In most cases, participation would not have been possible without the grant money with many of the youth never having been on a plane before. Sam revealed to me his goals in attending Sundance: to give the youth a sense of entitlement in the world, which he felt many Oakland youth lack; to get them out of their neighborhoods; to see films that will inspire their own videomaking; to create a perception of Youthsapes as a leading youth video production team; and to have fun and reward them for their hard work.

Hank, an African American senior, was inspired by a low-budget film he watched at Sundance, which he recalled in his year-end interview four months later:

From Sundance I learned what a really brilliant short film looks like. I realized what we could do with a good script and concept because even though they weren't million dollar short films -- they were like \$75,000 short films, which is more than I'm going to have for a while, because it takes years to get those kinds of connections. But I saw this one from Austin, Texas...It was really cheap and funny. If you get something that works, even if you don't have a lot of money you can still put out a great product. I like knowing that [it's] possible.

Hank reveals how inspirational someone else's project was to his own filmmaking potential, despite obstacles such as financing. He felt his filmmaking possibilities and individual agency expand as a result of the empowering experience of seeing another struggling filmmaker receiving recognition in such a prestigious, yet decidedly "indie" venue as Sundance. Hank also mentioned the wonders of networking to produce videos with the resources one already has at one's disposal.

At Sundance, the youths had an opportunity to meet with a buyer of films for cable distribution so that she could offer advice and words of encouragement for beginning filmmakers. Angelica, a 16-year-old Mexican American student who came into the program with minimal technical skills, was especially attentive during the discussion about editing:

I learned from Sundance that if you want to know something, you have to just go for it and ask. I also learned how to critique in a way. I remember [Laura] saying that new editors like to keep scenes that don't need to be there, so it really helped me since I'm doing editing now.

This ability to be flexible in one's approach to a socially interactive medium demonstrates her understanding that in time, she will be better able to focus on packaging a video for public consumption rather than holding on to the details (e.g. scenes that were fun or difficult to shoot). As one of the more introverted participants in the program, Angelica's realization of her potential to gain social capital – being able to ask others for help and advice – was critical in her development as a video-maker, editor, and citizen with an emerging voice.

Theme 2: Safe space for creative expression of social capital

It's like this after-school program... takes you off the streets to a safe place. And on top of that they are not just making films, but they are making *art*, which is something we can't do in school anymore because I mean they cut the budget on art so it's like where are you going to go?

In the quote above, Chinese American 10th-grade participant, Kristine was grateful that this program allowed her to openly explore her media and artistic world despite an educational system that de-prioritized such activities. In order to understand how participants exercised their creative expression, I analyzed their videos for clues into motivation and intention beyond their verbal explanations during the interviews. Each of the videos was conceived and written by one or two participants, with the guidance and feedback of Sam and the entire group. The topics ranged widely from questioning dominant schooling paradigms to distorted western body image ideals, from anti-deportation rallies to bullying.

One particular piece co-conceived and co-directed by Manuel (16-year-old Caucasian) and Nelson (17-year-old African American) was a political experimental piece about a young man's search for someone to understand his point of view amid constant rejection. The writers reflected on the misrepresentation of facts in mainstream media, regulated by the adult media gatekeepers. After listening to Manuel and Nelson discuss their work at community screenings, I found that their intentions behind the script included raising awareness about the (a) debilitating effect of censorship in mainstream media that translates to a citizenry that is not encouraged to think outside of the box or question dominant views, and (b) the power of finding allies and an accepting community to support freedom of expression. This video, incidentally, won a nationwide youth media and censorship award for which they flew to New York to accept and speak publicly about what this experience meant to them, thereby increasing their sociocultural media capital.

Over the multiple cycles of video production that I witnessed during my observations, the participants collectively finished a compilation of their works on VHS tapes and DVDs, which were distributed to community-based organizations or at community screenings. Public service announcements featured messages targeted at diverse audiences (some translated into Spanish) about such issues as breaking stereotypes about African American youth, domestic violence, safe sex practices, and anti-smoking campaigns. During the screening Q&As, participants talked about their intention to increase public awareness of health and global social issues, which were both personal messages and political calls for social change. For instance, in Jalitha's video about a young African American child selling lemonade, the viewer isn't aware of the child's motivation behind needing to raise money until the end of the piece, when we find out that she is collecting for the South Asian tsunami relief efforts. Jalitha revealed that the tsunami was a major global issue that people in her local community should get more civically engaged about.

Theme 3: Developing a sense of community with diverse voices

Resisting the notion that a sense of community is a simplistic, effortless, and egalitarian merging of like-minded people (Burnett 1996; Joseph 2002), the Youthscapes staff reflected

during meetings about the risks they were taking by inviting young people with little in common to collaboratively create. At the beginning of the program, they would often notice how reluctant the young people were to get to know others who didn't go to their school or who didn't have the same personality, aesthetics, or technical skills. Initially, the process of developing a story and critiquing each other did not go smoothly, with the young people sizing each other up and becoming defensive when they felt "disrespected." Once the year-end screening date approached, internal disagreements began to be less contentious and more productive, as everyone involved would continue to move past and appreciate their differences while maintaining investment with each project. By the end of program involvement, many participants reflected on their appreciation of how the program intentionally brought together diverse voices wanting to have a creative outlet:

It's the fact that this is an organization that helps kids who are from the ghetto or ... who aren't wealthy and maybe are at risk of getting into violence or drugs... I like the fact that I get to work with so many amazing people, that we have a forum to get people from different socioeconomic backgrounds --any kind of background... that we get together to do something that we all enjoy but at the same time it's not just one thing...It's whatever it is to that person, but we all come together and relate through that forum. I feel that sometimes adults don't give young people a chance to speak and I think that's what this program allows.

In the above quote, Kristine revealed her appreciation of the creative space to express her individuality while also producing a collective and diverse youth voice for a community audience. Victor, an African American senior and the only one still participating since the beginning of the program 4 years prior, reflected on this opportunity to make social statements through video, underscoring the importance of representing diverse voices which he believed the mainstream media overlooks:

...the way that they portray youth or my people or people period, just in certain ways that things are shot or certain messages that come across but aren't necessarily true, but they are reinforcing that it is true. I kind of catch more of that now. I see the importance of media being in the hands of youth... It's more like this is a part of my life that you guys say it's one way and actually it's way, way different. That's the power I find in video... I feel that media gives you a chance to show the world what you see through your eyes.

Not only did Victor demonstrate his developing critical media literacy, but he found that his role did not have to be limited to being a *passive* consumer of the media misrepresentation. He described a sense of empowerment and ability to correct an injustice, so to speak, by "taking charge" (Halleck, 2002) of the images of urban minority youth on the screen.

One of the findings of the video analyses was the frequent intentional use of multicultural characters with diverse perspectives, like in a story about the restrictive school climate for students of color and one about exposing the damaging effects of bullying due to body weight. During community screenings, participants were often asked by audiences if there was any autobiographical "truth" to the stories they told, and these young media producers at times revealed their hidden identities within these rather political yet personal expressions of social messages through video.

Lynn, a 12th-grade Chinese American participant who went on to study media at a local community college, echoed Kristine's thoughts on the value of bringing diverse perspectives and recalled the empowering process of writing grants to gain more media community access and broadcasting opportunities:

Well, when we first got here and got a grant from KQED to do public service announcements and they wanted to focus on issues of Latino health. So we sat in the meeting room and we all gave out our ideas about what we wanted to do. I gave out an idea that was about how a teen friend is pregnant and we shot in one day and it was really successful. I could look back and see the progress that I've made and the progress that we've made together. It's just amazing looking back at that. They aired it on American Family on KQED...I really like how all the projects that we do are community based.

Lynn described her increased sense of voice and collective impact to relay prosocial messages about multicultural issues within the program, which guided young producers to reach for more sociocultural capital to promote community social change.

Discussion and implications

Through my researcher lens merging media literacy, community psychology, and youth development, I explored the nonlinear process of how marginalized youth of color were given opportunities to tell personal stories that went through different iterations after feedback from within and beyond the youth program. They both welcomed and struggled to incorporate diverse voices that resonated with their collective need to offer alternative representations of young people in an adult-controlled media landscape. The youth videos were collaborative storytelling devices, which allowed these youth to actively protest an issue that they felt needed to be opened up for community dialogue. Whether it was on teen health promotion or censorship, these young people were offered opportunities to participate in their own social activism and sanctioned cultural critique.

As with other asset-based youth development programs in which ownership and social capital are critical to participant engagement (Jarrett, Sullivan, and Watkins 2005), the coordinators at Youthscape were cognizant of the need to provide guidance yet allow youth to find their own niche and increase the belief in their own abilities to conceive and produce quality works. These adolescents found a sense of belonging within a community media network, which empowered them to thrive as productive citizens with a sociopolitical voice. This communal concept of collaboration and networking has been described by Jenkins and colleagues (2006) as a critical skill to effectively engage in a participatory media culture. Motivated to congregate to produce media that gained their community's attention in hopes of promoting social transformations, these media participants developed their sense of empowerment, sociocultural capital, and feelings of connectedness to their communities, which in turn, enhanced collective and community voice.

One of the most invigorating aspects of the video projects was the multitude of voices that came from youth of diverse backgrounds, in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, academic standing, etc. It may be critical for youth media coordinators to be selective in the recruitment and retention of students, so that no program is "ghetto-ized" in the process (i.e. develop a reputation of only attracting "at-risk" youth). Through developing a collective identity and accomplishing tasks collaboratively, youth become aware that everyone offers a valuable and unique voice to the project despite differences in background, increasing optimism for group ownership and making a positive social impact.

Future directions

Future research is needed regarding the unique contributions of adult and peer mentoring in youth media production and the contribution of diverse voices in the youth media landscape. Educational implications of this study include providing more opportunities for young people to tell their stories through hands-on media making, such as photo collages or mock

advertisements to build individual and community understanding of social issues. This can be accomplished by not only creating new youth media programs that must compete for the same limited funding resources, but by networking with existing youth media organizers to advance each group's sociocultural capital, thereby increasing the potential for positive youth development. In the case of community-based youth media organizations, empowerment and the development of voice resides in the ability to go beyond being passive consumers of media culture to active designers and producers of an alternative youth media, that in turn, can increase a community's power for social change.

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