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Urban Youth and The Pursuit of Literacy Through Video Production

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Video production programs have leaked into high school with a wide variety of purposes and structures. I have studied four different programs and visited half a dozen others and find the activities, goals, and products to have enormous variation. Goodman (2003) argues that there are three dominant strands of program: technology integration, media literacy, and community media arts. Some programs emphasize the potential of careers in television while others seek a mere introduction to a new medium or a different approach toward bridging the digital divide. Programs are in schools, after- school programs, and a wide variety of youth programs. Additionally, researchers have increasingly promoted video as a way of developing student *voice* or *agency* (for example, Davis, 2004; Fontenos & Rohatgi, 2007; Kulla- Abbott & Polman, 2008; Saunders, 1997). The ways in which video production impacts youth development is as diverse as the programs, yet in all contexts, clear engagement with practices that promote some type of literacy can be observed. While all youth may benefit from participating in video production, it is particularly effective in the lives of disenfranchised and impoverished urban youth. It can, in short, be a road to literacy and other culturally valued activities for youth who have otherwise

been resistant or excluded.

My perspective on literacy is shaped by the work of Scribner and Cole (1999), in which they concluded that the meaning and effects of literacy are tied to how people use it. In other words, "the meaning of literacy is [viewed as] local and situated," thus understanding adolescent literacy requires an investigation of how youth use reading and writing in and out of school (Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky, 2009, p. 8). Christenbury et al. describe the changing meaning of the word "literacy" throughout history and across contexts, transforming from an indication of the most basic uses of signs to complex and reflective uses of writing. Olson defines literacy as ". . . not just learning the abc's; it is learning to use the resources of writing for a culturally defined set of tasks and procedures" (1994, p. 43). One of the problems that we face is that our definitions lack agreement about which tasks and procedures are most important. Furthermore, our ways of assessing literacy frequently have little to do with how texts are actually used by youth (Marshall, 2009).

Nevertheless, there are increasing demands for including some level of critical thinking in definitions of literacy. This need for *critical literacy* is in part a response to the changing demands on workers to flexibly and meaningfully use a range of different types of texts. Additionally work toward some type of multimedia literacy is called for, particularly since the boom of digital media (Rhodes & Robnolt, 2009). Yet many urban youth are

victims of the digital divide, lacking sufficient exposure to the tools that increasingly dominate many work places. The merger of images and video with text via computers and the internet have transformed the "texts" available, yet they are not equally accessible, and at the same time, the texts that schools emphasize are not the texts youth most frequently use (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009). Developing multimedia and computer literacy is a necessary part of preparing young people for their futures, but more importantly, critical literacy can more often be attained by urban youth through video production than through standard approaches to literacy.

Video production furthers critical literacy in youth in three different ways. First, the use of the technology consistently promotes student engagement: Students become excited about their school work when they are creating a video, and the activity is entirely about creating meaning that can be shared with others. Second, several characteristics of video production, from camera use to editing, afford new ways of seeing and reflecting such that the structure of the activity scaffolds literacy development. And third, the school and sometimes the wider community become involved in the production and reception of videos in ways that are impossible for written compositions, thus new communities emerge that collectively engage in more communal literacy practices. These three affordances of youth video production have been observed in all contexts, though differences clearly exist, and the affordances work together to

promote critical literacy. Therefore video production in any context has the potential to reach urban youth who might otherwise find their experiences with different media disconnected while the literacy that is desired by schools remains beyond their reach.

<div align="center">Youth Engagement</div>

For a school to succeed in educating youth, it must first find a way of engaging students in its activities. Without some level of engagement, learning and development cannot happen. Yet all schools routinely fail to engage large numbers of students. The school with the greatest difficulties I have ever observed in this sense was a large high school in Central Los Angeles. In the courses I observed, lateness and attendance were a huge problem, yet the more disturbing part was watching students, day after day, sit and do nothing, despite the assignments their teachers gave them. Students would go through the motions of doing some work yet spend a long two-hour block period without ever writing more than the list of things they were supposed to be doing. My efforts to engage them in conversation were often futile, and frequently, I was simply ignored.

Engaging students in such a setting was frustrating for teachers and observers, and in many ways the students conditioned their teachers to have very low expectations. The three teachers involved in the video production program were reduced to one who was willing to continue before the school finally decided to convert the program into something

strictly vocational. The teachers made many mistakes, and the biggest as far as I was concerned was their requirement for students to write out a script or storyboard before allowing students to use cameras. They reasoned that, because students genuinely wanted to use the camera, they would do the things they liked least: They would write. This was, however, largely not the case and few students produced a video when the requirement remained intact.

Nevertheless, when students were allowed to use video cameras, they got out of their seats and turned the cameras on one another or went to places in the school where they could find or create an event of interest. The only time among these students that I saw enthusiasm for school activities was when they used the cameras. The teachers, frustrated by broken equipment and off-task activities, became increasingly controlling of the camera equipment so that students had fewer opportunities to show their enthusiasm, but in one class in particular, I was impressed on a couple of occasions to see a flurry of activity as the video cameras were brought out along with the necessary props or the freedom to legitimately leave the classroom. During these moments, the majority of students would become active. I wanted to see the teachers embrace these moments and work to keep this momentum going, but instead students' participation fluctuated with the activities presented to them.

At other schools, the starting point was different: Students were at

least a little bit engaged with classroom activities, but a different type of engagement became possible with the addition of a camera. In one more traditional classroom where lectures were a standard part of classroom activities, the use of the video camera shifted students from being passive receivers of education to active creators of their experiences. Other activities in the class accomplished this to some extent: Journals reflecting on the reading and their sharing brought student thoughts into the classroom, but their actions were still a response to the official discourse. Similarly, they responded to demonstrations of how to use the equipment by demonstrating their ability to duplicate it in a hands-on way, but they were still only duplicating someone else's performance. When finally it was time for them to create their own video projects, students decided on the topics, established the scenes to be recorded, used the video cameras and other equipment, and later edited their footage into a finished project. They were no longer reflecting but creating, and the enthusiasm with which some students embraced this role contrasted sharply with their usual participation. They were *making meaning* rather than receiving it.

Yet this meaning-making is not individualistic but overtly social. Most projects are completed as groups, thus negotiation and debate are necessary parts of the activity, drawing students further into the activity as they engage one another. Even when a student does a project alone, he or she normally involves other people as actors or in other roles. When

someone creates a video that in no way involves another person, they still must record some subject and thus are engaged with the material world, which continues to engage students in social processes. For instance, students who were assigned to the creation of "digital art" tended to focus on images rather than people, but in exploring their schools for images, they became part of the school, engaging the walls, furnishings, and trees around the campus. Though it was officially off-task, they sought out friends as they wandered, and a school activity provided the opportunity to involve friends in their work and to attract attention because they held a video camera. Unlike writing, the act of video production brings youth into contact with the world and is thus inherently engaging. Video production transforms the "passive" act of watching others into a dynamic and valued activity.

Many students used their participation in video projects to shape their identities and relationships within the class and school. One vocational program broadcast a five-minute student-news program four days a week, and the students' roles in the production became visible and salient parts of their school participation. Not only did other students recognize those who sat in front of the camera, but the news "staff" were recognized for the service that they performed for the school. They were no longer mere recipients—consumers—of educational "goods;" they were producers as well. Across programs, the use of cameras allowed students to speak to

other students, faculty, staff, and community members that they never would have without the camera. One student, who had been home- schooled and who was not able to easily integrate with his peers, found a way to relate to classmates and change his experience of the high- school social life. In his video, he can be observed to increasingly talk with classmates, moving from an entirely passive role to one of entering in the usual banter as his project neared its end. For this student, the increased engagement was in the social life of the school—a personal challenge that can dramatically influence school performance.

One affordance of video production is that students have the opportunity to express and integrate aspects of themselves, communities, non- school activities, and personal goals into their course work. Digital stories—an approach in which youth are assigned to create autobiographical videos—are one popular way of having students explore their own experiences as part of the program's goals (Davis, 2004), but even in more standard approaches to video production, youth have a knack for bringing outside interests into their video projects (Beaty, 2005). The assignment to do a "how to" or demonstration video led one group to "teach" their audience how to perform a skateboarding trick. News stories allowed students to focus on extracurricular activities like sports and theater. Furthermore, students found ways of *playing* with their work by trying out special effects, satirizing assignments like commercials, and putting humor

in their projects.

Students can more easily bring their identities—however they view them—into school with video. One group of Native American students to some extent negated the expectations of a director who was looking for "Native Americaness" in their projects but instead found some critique of the modern boarding school experience and hints of Native American resistance to U.S. imperialism. At the Educational Video Center, students regularly take on topics such as gentrification, sexism, racism, and immigration in ways that are both personal and political. Other programs are not so inviting of personal issues, assigning topics like commercials and "how to" videos, but video production invites the cultures of students into the classroom even when teachers disregard it. Through satire, one group of students played with their ethnicity by writing text under a potential insurance customer that said "Actual Wetback." Another student took advantage of an interview to introduce his "white" classmates to Mexican music. Comments like these last two are made in school all the time, but they take on a new legitimacy and visibility when they become part of a video project.

Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, video engages students in school by bringing the medium that has been the major source of entertainment outside of school into school. Young people—most people— like television and movies. They view them as entertainment in ways that

books or anything written never have. Video production allows students—for the first time usually—to make videos that resemble in one way or another their favorite forms of entertainment. Moreover, the look of what they record is instantly recognizable and understandable in ways that writing or drawings simply cannot be. This affordance of creating fairly professional video productions with little initial effort is far more engaging for many students than traditional school activities. Therefore, students eagerly pick up a video camera while in school and take the first and most fundamental step in improving their literacy through video production.

The Development of Literacy

The written word is an important tool for thinking: Writing promotes reflection and conscious engagement with the meaning of language, but the ability to promote critical thinking is dependent on how it is used (Olson, 1994). Youth too often resist critical engagement with writing in part because it is not part of their lives except at school. They simply do not find value with sufficient frequency in written texts to reflect on their own or other people's writing in meaningful ways. Video production, on the other hand, draws young people into the conscious reflection of composition by using a medium that has always held entertainment value for them. In the same way that a *hybrid language* is created by combining the discourses students bring from home with school discourses (Gutierrez, Baquedano-

Lopez, & Tejada, 1999), video production creates a *third space* (that place where hybrid languages emerge) where the discourses of home, community, and school can become meaningfully mixed by bringing a "home" medium into school.

Students have learned through years of television viewing what a good finished video looks like—they have learned to "read" a television program or movie—yet they often find that what they intended when they make their first video is not as perfect or as clear when they sit back to watch it. When beginning a program, students are often able to author their own video for the first time. Increasingly, students have electronic gadgets, but impoverished students are less likely to have access to video cameras at home. Furthermore, very few home videographers edit their work in any meaningful way (Chalfen, 1992). Students in a "New Media 1" course, who were not given the opportunity to edit their work until the end of the semester, expressed surprise about editing. They did not know editing was possible for them, let alone how to go about it. It is moments like this that the digital divide becomes most apparent. The opportunity to record and edit video is new for most urban students. The opportunity, however, bridges what is part of home and their lives outside of school with the cultural practices of school. By creating and editing their videos, students are increasingly exposed to and brought into discourses that are reflective and critical of composition.

Particularly when students produce multiple projects that are screened or their shots and "rough cuts" are reviewed in class, student videographers recognize that they have an audience for their work. This in and of itself is motivating, and moreover, the motivation can be harnessed in the planning and editing of video. As students begin to see their work through other's eyes, they are encouraged to take a more critical perspective of their own work—if only to make sure there is nothing embarrassing in the final cut that "everyone" will see. The fact that planning and editing are normally done in groups facilitates this more critical perspective as ideas and styles compete for inclusion, and the editing process forces students to review shots and decide where to trim them and in what order to place them. At the Educational Video Center, teachers actively push students to think seriously about editing decisions, thus encouraging the development of critical literacy beyond what may occur if left to themselves. Editing programs afford this engagement in ways that writing does not—simply because the process is more social.

The promotion of critical awareness starts with the camera itself as places, events, and people are literally seen through a new lens and the possibilities for zooming in or out, shifting ones position, or including movement gives those students who discover them the chance to change how they see what they see. Repeatedly viewing shots during editing emphasizes these changes, and the editing programs offer more ways of

distorting recorded events. The simultaneous familiarity and newness leads students to reflect on what they see, promoting new perspectives even during the simple act of watching television as youth recognize techniques they have used or get ideas about how they might improve their work.

This recognition and reflection are essential for the development of critical literacy, but it need not remain only with the medium of video. Depending on the type of project, the literacy most valued by schools—reading and writing—can and often should be integrated into the production process. The struggle is to get students to meaningfully use text, which is more difficult when they see writing logs and scripts as mere obstacles. Students have routinely been observed "faking" logs or other required paper work. One student went so far as to describe the purpose of his video as proving to his teachers that he did not need to write a script. The requirement to complete the writing before the "fun" part could begin seemed to add to the dislike of the written work, whereas if the writing had been introduced as tools to use—so that their videos would be better—students may have embraced some of the writing tasks. The danger, of course, is that students will not choose to use the tools.

One program I observed did not use writing in the planning or editing phases at all, having students explore video as a visual art and emphasizing the exploration, but even this program used titles and credits, and the editing programs require basic computer skills, thus facilitating

computer literacy and requiring some engagement with text. Since non-linear editing became easily and more affordably available on computers, even the most traditionally vocational program I observed only noted the old linear, tape to tape editing process. In the "digital art" program, writing was not necessary because the editing program iMovie uses images from the video to mark different video clips. Though computer literacy is meaningfully furthered, writing was for the most part not useful to the them. If a second or lengthier project had been undertaken, additional writing may have been necessary: Writing would have become useful as students worked to plan projects that were better than their first projects, and a longer project may have necessitated some written records to organize the many clips. For this program, traditional literacy was not important.

The Educational Video Center, by contrast, makes writing a regular part of its programs. It has youth work on documentaries, requiring research and the preparation of interview questions. In these more complicated projects, some notation becomes necessary to keep track of facts and decisions relating to the composition of the projects. Students must find a way to communicate their ideas effectively with others as well as needing to work out and remember decisions. Additionally, this organization makes use of journaling to further reflection on the process of production. The organization has integrated writing thoroughly into their

after-school program with apparent success. In shorter projects that are integrated into regular school courses, journaling and other reflective writing can easily get lost due to the brevity of the program and increased time constraints, but research and interviews still require the use of reading and writing. The necessity of reading and writing, therefore, varies with the complexity and type of project, with more improvisational or exploratory projects requiring less.

Research, scripts, logs, interviews and the implementation of text in the video itself lead to the use of reading and writing as tools, thus students become engaged in traditional literacy with a purpose that is frequently more meaningful than the completion of a paper that no one other than the teacher will ever read. The same publicness that leads students to think critically about the video, leads them to use texts meaningfully. Thus multimedia texts are brought meaningfully into the lives of youth when they engage with some video productions. Further research can clarify which contexts are most successful in this respect.

Creating Literate Communities

One of the most powerful affordances of video production is that it has the ability to include and be accessible to communities outside the classroom and school. First, community members often become part of the video projects through interviews and performances. Experts and "street

interviews" are routine parts of the Educational Video Center's documentaries, and in all the programs, school staff, teachers, and students are routinely asked to participate. When cameras are permitted to go home, families and neighbors become part of projects. This participation connects students to community members during the process of meaning- making, which can be powerful in literacy development. For instance, while a pair of art students explored their schools, they came across a teacher, who performed for them, and one student exclaimed, "That was only a one time thing, and I recorded it." They went on to record an art project that the teacher had created. These were moments of connection that would never have happened without the camera, and the comments of the students' suggested that they were important to them—important for the relationship with school. Similarly, when they had a camera and an official reason, students found the courage to speak to students from different social groups, experts, and complete strangers, bringing their meaning- making into diverse communities.

The community members who participate are often the first in line when it comes time to screen the final project. When screenings go beyond the classroom or more simply when students take their projects home, the videos are entertainment, a source for conversation, and a stimulant for further involvement in video or the topic that was covered. Families will watch and appreciate a video in ways that they rarely display

toward a class paper. The youth find that they have created a product that was meaningful enough for others to care about, and more importantly, they have the opportunity for conversations about their work that they rarely have with other school work. These conversations and the re- viewing of projects stimulate further reflection and critical thinking, and a community larger than and outside of the classroom becomes an instrumental part of the process. If, as a sociocultural perspective suggests, the effects of literacy are tied to cultural practices, then texts have to become part of those cultural practices outside of school to bring about critical literacy. The literacies traditionally valued by school simply do not connect with most communities and the lives of youth outside school. If a major obstacle to critical literacy for urban youth is their lack of engagement with texts outside of school, then the communities that participate in and appreciate student- made videos succeed in building practices that connect home, community, and school and therefore help promote critical literacy in the students who seem to most lack it.

Conclusion

A sociocultural perspective of literacy views its power as being dependent upon how the literacy is used. The first issue for promoting literacy is engagement: Youth have to *use* it. Many youth are already passive users of video at quantities far exceeding print, and observation in many contexts

demonstrates that youth will more eagerly pick up a video camera than a pencil. Furthermore, they will more willingly edit and revise their work. Their friends and family will actually watch their videos, and the knowledge of those future audiences motivates students to devote more attention to their product. As planning, revision, and in some cases, research become important to students, reading and writing can become tools for accomplishing these tasks. Traditional literacies are no longer ends in and of themselves that are important only in school. The embeddedness of reading and writing in the production process helps students to become truly literate as they begin seeing their writing as a way to accomplish a meaningful goal, and the public nature of screenings helps students to see their own work in new ways. In the process, new literacy communities are created that use written texts, images, and video together to share meanings, assuring more than anything else that learning and development will continue outside of the classroom.

In sum, the following characteristics of video production have been discussed:

•Youth engagement

  •Using a camera and editing video increases engagement in school.

  •Video production requires engagement in meaning- making.

  •Youth can uniquely express themselves and their interests.

•Development of literacy

> •A third space is created as the most commonly *used* medium becomes a manner of expression. Videos are hybrid languages as they incorporate and stimulate the use of multiple discourses.
>
> •Traditional literacy becomes a tool for researching, planning, and communicating.
>
> •Video production with disadvantaged youth moves toward the dissolution of the digital divide.

•Creating a literate community

> •Community members, places, and events are easily integrated into projects.
>
> •The community, including family, peers, and community organizations, can easily appreciate and honor the edited videos.

In conclusion, video production programs are perhaps easiest to pursue outside of school where the constraints on time and movement are fewer, but video production can best serve students by bringing them into school. While my research is only now directly addressing this proposition, students report that a lack of meaning and opportunity to be heard are serious obstacles to their engagement in school (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009). By having students engage with video in school, its benefits can become part of the student-school relationship, potentially improving student engagement throughout the curriculum. The increased sense of agency,

meaning, and community that video production promotes can help bring these qualities into school where they most seem to need nurturing.

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