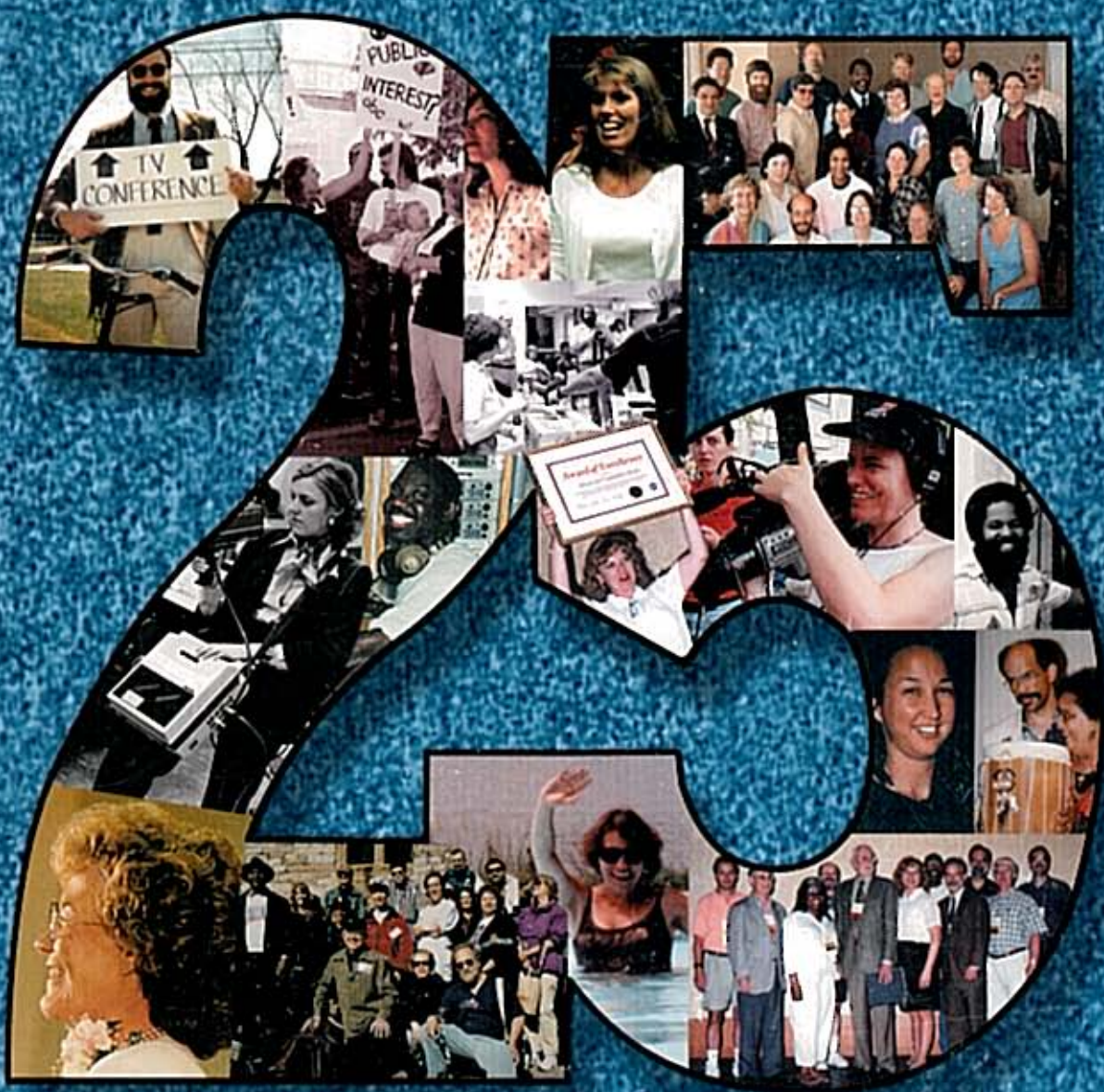


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Reflections on Community Media Training

LOOKING BACK & LOOKING AHEAD

An interview with jesikah maria ross

Jesikah maria ross has been actively involved in all facets of community media training for the past 10 years. Those of us who have been around for a while probably first remember her as being one of the pioneers in designing training curriculum and projects that integrated critical viewing activities alongside production training in the early 1990s, now commonly referred to as media literacy training. Since then she has helped to establish the concept of media literacy within Access training and recently completed a master's thesis entitled Community Television Training Reconsidered: A Model for Media Literacy, Social Capital, and Civic Engagement.

To begin, can you talk a little bit about the role and importance of training in the community media movement?

Well, throughout its history, the Access movement has asserted that it provides social benefits to communities. The original vision, coming out of the social protest era of the 1960s, focused on using video technology for empowerment and social change. By the mid-1990s, the Access vision was framed in terms of utilizing video and new media technology to "build and strengthen community". And today, some folks including myself, define our mission as centered on social and community development. The way the access centers, and by extension the Access movement, implemented these social-benefits missions was through training programs. They were designed to teach ordinary folks how to use media tools to address their issues, share their ideas and cultures, nurture confidence and capacity. It was intended that they would communicate with their neighbors by creating and circulating programs over public access television channels, community radio frequencies, via the Internet and to a lesser degree through public screenings.

So with that perspective, I think training is one of the most important tasks of media access centers. To me, training has played one of the most vital, yet least recognized roles in attaining the social benefits goals Access strives for. And I think effective training—whether you define training to include outreach, mentorship, production assistance, workshops or all of the above—is crucial to the evolution and advancement of the field. It is a cornerstone in our foundation that needs to stay strong, useful, and well positioned to support us into our future.

I say that because I feel that although over the many years Access practitioners have gained a solid background in successfully teaching community members how to use television and other production equipment, I'm not so convinced that we've figured out how to create training programs that not only build technical skills but also encourage personal development (often referred to as "empowerment"), community engagement, and critical perspective. And I think in these times of fickle policymakers, the incessant commercialization of public space, and let's not forget the ever-changing telecommunications landscape, our training needs to generate measurable community development outcomes to survive and flourish. We need to demonstrate our public value

and community impact if we want to keep our slot on the dial and place at the funding table.

I know you've spent time researching and writing about community TV training, from Canada's Challenge for Change Project, which was the original model for public access television, to a CMR dedicated to current US training principles and practices. Tell us about some of the key themes or trends you've observed in community training, over the years?

I'd say that overall the most notable theme or trend I've sensed is the change in training models. The training model used in the early years of the Access movement (both in Canada and the U.S.) followed a self-help community development paradigm. Self-help is based on the premise that people can, will, and should collaborate to solve community problems. Self-help community development typically involved a facilitator—sometimes called a social animator or community organizer—who worked with a group, serving as a resource and a guide, helping the group identify and prioritize issues, analyze problems, and create plans for action. Similarly, Access trainers and outreach workers during this period often served as facilitators, teaching citizens how to use technology in the context of identifying needs and interests, addresses concerns, and circulating culture. This type of training was process oriented and participant driven. The goal was personal empowerment, community improvement, and social transformation.

Over the years, however, the primary training model used in the Access movement shifted away from self-help toward another community development approach: technology transfer. Technology transfer is based on the belief that disempowerment and disadvantage stem from a lack of access to innovations in technology. Once provided with technology and training in its use, people are able to use it to improve conditions of individual and community life. Following a technology transfer approach, most current Access training programs began to prioritize teaching individuals how to access and operate community television equipment to produce public access television programs rather than engage the public in an interactive processes of personal and community betterment. In other words, training became more technology focused and product driven. The goal seemed to be to generate programs to cablecast on community access channels, instead of emphasizing individual and community communication building.

I should point out that I'm speaking generally here. Access centers are wildly diverse and have different types of training programs based on the center's mission, training philosophy, resources, and assessed community needs. But in terms of general trends, I'd say the shift from 'self-help' to 'technology transfer' is a major one.



Your recent publications have pointed out several of issues with current Access training, can you summarize some of them for us...

Well, in my research and fieldwork, I've identified several inter-related issues. Let me try to briefly sketch out three of them: the technical emphasis, the brief and intensive workshops model, and briefly the pedagogical methods. These three issues are interconnected and link back to the technology transfer approach, which I feel is the most widely used model in access training today.

The Technical Emphasis

The technology transfer approach used in most current training programs seeks to facilitate community improvement by imparting technical knowledge and skill. Since Access training programs aim to enable the public to use media tools to circulate messages, certainly a significant portion of training should focus on developing a level of technical proficiency with production equipment. But unfortunately, technically oriented training alone does not translate into programs or processes that work to build and strengthen community. When it's unaccompanied by critical thinking about how to apply technology, technical training itself is ineffective in fostering community building. I always remember something that Greg Boozell said ...I don't have the exact quote but it was something like... "You can't assume that people can make interesting and important television without first knowing how to think critically about the medium, their communities, and their lives". He was a long time Access training specialist at Chicago Access Network.

Another shortcoming of the technical emphasis embodied in the technology transfer approach is that it makes areas critical to community building processes—such as public interaction, collective problem solving and collaboration—less important. Technology transfer tends to position trainers as experts and learners as tabula rasa: blank slates to be written upon. The trainer's primary role is to transfer her/his knowledge to trainees about how to use technology. The learner's primary role is to receive and absorb the knowledge for future use.

But, in the light of the Access mission—which I believe aspires to increase individual self-confidence, civic participation, public dialogue, and community self-awareness—this method is problematic. First, with this approach trainees do not have the opportunity to shape their own learning process to meet their learning styles or needs. Second, this approach does not support the development of critical thinkers, potentially hindering the trainees' ability to discover how media tools can be used to address their issues, cultures, or personal goals. And third, it doesn't support bringing to voice alternative opinions or perspectives perhaps counter to established ideas. It diminishes the likelihood for shared understanding of diverse points of view within the training session group as well as the community.

Next the 'Brief and Intensive Workshops' Issue:

The current length and intensity of typical Access training programs can also work against delivering community-building outcomes. Because the skill and mastery of media production requires a good chunk of time and energy, most of the curriculum is dedicated to learning how to operate equipment in short training programs. As a result, little time and attention is devoted to principles and practices vital to stimulating participation, dialogue, critical inquiry, and community engagement.

For example, there is little time for activities which model and

support community building within the training, such as sharing personal experiences, debriefing exercises, and collaborating on projects. Brief, equipment-focused training also tends to exclude community television history, analysis of commercial media structure and influence, and critical viewing exercises—all of which develop critical perspective of the social context of communication. It often skips over engaging participants in a discussion about the civic context of their interests, or to ponder questions like "why have access to communications media? why is community media important? why use video at all to share local art and culture, create public dialogue or address local issues?" Without this kind of connection, learners typically do not have the opportunity to really grasp the community-building mission of the public access facility or the opportunities being presented to them. They don't connect with the social benefits of the Media Center's mission.

Another thing is that short, intense training classes are generally so content intensive that participants do not have enough time to absorb or practice what they have just learned. They suffer an information overload no matter how interesting or well delivered the content. It's no wonder then that trainers consistently report that trainees often do not feel confident with the equipment and/or do not come back after their training to make Access shows.

In short, the structure of these kinds of training programs—their brevity and intensity—do not serve the Access mission of building and strengthening community. They reinforce a focus on technical proficiency yet do not produce technically skilled community media users. What's worse, they exclude content areas and activities crucial to building community members' capacity to work collectively to examine public affairs, the role and influence of media, and the necessity of the services provided through community media centers.

And finally a bit about pedagogical methods.

The time constraints created by brief training programs, coupled with the emphasis on building individual technical knowledge and skill, cause Access trainers to employ lecture and demonstration as their main pedagogical methods. To be sure, these methods allow trainers to cover a lot of material in a short amount of time, control the learning process, and present practical applications of equipment. However, community education specialists see this combination of training strategies as problematic for many reasons. Let me quickly give you my top five:

- ▲ They emphasize one-way communication, "just learn the right buttons"
- ▲ Participants may not ask questions because of the size of the group, or time constraints, or the embarrassment of interrupting.
- ▲ They ignores varied learning styles of participants and limits creative and reflective learning and sharing.
- ▲ They endorses the authority figure concept, something that is counterproductive to a "culture" of democracy, and last but not least...
- ▲ Learning retention is very low—much is lost in 24 hours, and much of the rest is lost thereafter.

Lecture and demonstration, then, may not be the optimal teaching methods to promote critical thinking, self-confidence, collaboration, and civic participation (not to mention technical competency). In other words, they're not the most effective pedagogical strategies to create community-building skills aligned with

the Access mission.

Looking forward, what would be some of your suggestions to strengthen the field and movement through training?

Now there is a big and juicy question. If only we had pages we could fill! I guess to link back to some ideas we've covered, a couple of suggestions I'd make include:

- ▲ Create training programs that balance technology training and self-help approaches (this is already happening in several spots around the country);
- ▲ Conduct longer training programs, perhaps production/project based;
- ▲ Use a curriculum which can be easily modified to learners' needs and interests;
- ▲ Use a variety of pedagogical methods;
- ▲ Focus on activities that develop analysis, planning, and problem solving skills, whether you're doing critical viewing, production, or community screenings.

I'd also really like to see folks generate and test new models for training and report back on what they've discovered. Trainers are always tweaking their curriculum, adding to the repertoire of teaching tricks, and figuring out how to do what they do better. But they rarely have, or are encouraged to take time, to write up and present detailed findings. I think it would be extremely helpful to encourage or enable trainers to make time for this type of work and information exchange.

I'd also highly recommend that the Alliance find a way to more publicly and intentionally value the trainers. Although trainers are the frontline staff, the folks who work "in the trenches" on a day-to-day basis, they are usually treated a bit second class. Perhaps the Alliance could provide more professional development opportunities, especially training of trainers in key areas like facilitation, group dynamics, and popular education techniques. Or create a way for trainers to communicate best practices with one another on a regular basis, perhaps by bringing back and fully supporting the Trainers Special Interest Group and its publication *On Track* or setting up and managing a trainers listserv. Create a "trainer of the year" award to go alongside the June Ryan White, Sue Buske, George Stony, and Hometown awards to honor trainers for the important role they play at our centers and in the Access movement. I think any of those efforts would go all a long way toward building trainer's capacity (skills, knowledge, and attitude) and, as a result, the capacity of our centers to generate community activist-thinking and create programs that get back to the social change agenda at the core of our beginning.

Give us a pipe-dream to work towards...

My personal dream is that the Alliance launch a community media trainer's institute similar to the Community Media Leadership Institute¹ where trainers from around the country, maybe from around the world, could come together on an annual basis and engage in a structured and professional training of trainers workshop. At such an institute, trainers could gain a background in principles of community education and organizing, examine community media training case studies, have time to share tips and techniques, receive coaching while practicing new skills, and build networks among their peers for continued collaboration, information-sharing, and support. It would rock!

Any other last comments or parting shots?

Nope, just thanks for the opportunity to share my ideas on training and for including a piece on training in this important historical document.

Jesikah maria ross is currently working in South Africa, designing and developing participatory media training programs at Mediaworks, an NGO working to redress apartheid imbalances in both mainstream and community media. She can be reached at either jmross@ucdavis.edu or jesikah@new.co.za

¹The Community Media Leadership Institute (CMLI) is a five day program offered annually by The Learning Commons, a non-profit group made up of Alliance members and Access practitioners. It is an intensive, experiential learning workshop designed to foster visionary leadership in the community media field and promote the use of media tools for dialogue and community building.



Prescient & Prophetic

We are in the midst of a communications revolution that is bringing about a shift in our way of living that dwarfs our shift away from an agricultural to an industrial economy a century ago. Every means of work and relationships will undergo change: how we use energy, what jobs are available, what products we will be permitted to buy, how churches and other public organizations will conduct their affairs, even how we will live in families. But even our best experts on the workplace are unable to forecast what life will be like in two decades from now.

The dominant force for change is the marriage of electronic means of communication to the computer. A number of technologies that provided communication channels or handled information, and which were once individually distinct, have now been molded into a single whole. Telephones, satellites, television and radio, cable TV, microwave circuits and computers are now so interrelated that the difference between communications and computer services is impossible to distinguish.

— Rev. Dr. Everett C. Parker, at the 1982 NFLCP National Conference in St. Paul, MN

Honor & Admiration

I don't know if it means more to me to have been honored for the work with the organization I care so much about or to have received the award named after a good friend and a woman I so admire. (My term on the Board also lasted longer than my marriage, so do you think there's any chance we can get the 'Ireland' off the award?)



— Jan Leshner (Ireland), 1988 recipient of the Buske Leadership Award[™]