

By jesikah maria ross

Beyond TECHNICAL TRAINING: VIDEO AS A TOOL FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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In our increasingly fragmented and media-focused society, media arts centers are uniquely positioned to bring people together to share arts and culture, create public dialogue, and address local issues. By providing media tools and instruction in their use, these centers are ideal conduits for promoting empowerment, media literacy and social change. In fact, the mission of most media arts organizations — from universities to museums to cable access stations — centers on facilitating social and community development. Yet their training and community education programs tend to focus exclusively on the technical aspects of media production. Often left out are elements which are crucial in helping learners to identify their needs, discover their passions, address their issues and connect with their geographic or cultural communities.

As we move toward the next century with the ever new digital technologies and the continuing battle for funding and access to public space, perhaps the focus of media education programs should not be on technology, but rather on how people learn to work together to use technology to identify and communicate issues important to them, build critical thinking skills and forge community coalitions in the process. But what would a production

curriculum look like that not only builds technical skills but encourages agency, community engagement and critical perspective? A pilot program I created and implemented may be able to provide some insights into this question.

The Davis Video Project (DVP)

The DVP brought together 8 young Davis residents (ages 16 - 22) from different backgrounds to form a multicultural video production team. The project focused on participants learning about each other, their city, and how to use the tools of television to stimulate community development around local, multicultural issues. Davis is a university town struggling to remain a cohesive community as it experiences the rapid population growth typical today in California. Located just 15 miles west of Sacramento, the state capital, Davis has a population of about 50,000. The vast majority of Davis residents are European American. Over the past several years, however, the demographics of the city have been steadily diversifying.

DVP training sessions, which were 2-1/2 hours long, took place twice a week for three months. Following the training, community screenings of participants'

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work occurred approximately four times a week for one month. The Davis Video Project was made possible by a grant from the Davis Civic Arts Commission in conjunction with in-kind donations of equipment, facilities, supplies, and administrative assistance from Davis Community Television (DCTV).

Training Program Model

The DVP training program consisted of three interrelated components: video production, community organizing, and community screenings. Video production training focused on developing media literacy skills: the ability to access, analyze, and produce television. We read and discussed public access TV history, did critical viewing activities, screened and discussed a wide variety of media work, learned how to operate DCTV production equipment, and collaborated in teams to make short videos.

The community organizing component emphasized how to work as a group toward a common goal: bringing Davisites together to view and discuss videos which reflected the project participants' issues, ideas, and cultures. Each DVP participant was responsible for orchestrating a screening of the group's work at a community site. In the process, we learned how to conduct community research (i.e., identify sites, sponsors, and resources), create and implement outreach plans, generate promotional materials, and manage various logistics related to coordinating public events.

The community screenings, which were free and open to the public, were followed by discussions facilitated by the DVP team. To prepare for these public events, team members did role playing to build skills in facilitating group discussion, handling controversial comments, and speaking in front of groups. They also devised a format for introducing the video presentation, a series of questions to stimulate a community conversation, and protocols for how to answer questions from the audience.

Throughout the different training components, there was a focus on social as well as technical learning. The team spent time sharing personal stories, exploring feelings about the city of Davis, and learning how to effectively participate in a group process. As DVP participant Mei-Ling put it: "I did learn about how to use the video equipment, but the technical aspect was not the reason why I am so affected by the project...In the group...I received an education about

people in general. The various personalities that sometimes clashed, but most of the time inspired each other, could not have demonstrated better how people have the ability to come together and work towards a common goal."

Three strategies I used to facilitate social learning were teambuilding, collective learning, and participatory decision making. Teambuilding activities — having meals together, collaborating on project activities, talking about a time when participants felt a sense of power — built trust, respect, and a sense of community among participants. Collective learning occurred by creating opportunities for participants to teach and learn from one another. The program promoted participatory decision-making by having team members deliberate and decide collectively on the project goals, timelines, and work plans. This deepened participant investment and ownership of project outcomes and helped build their skills and confidence in managing a group endeavor. All these strategies contributed to forming a close-knit and potent learning community. As DVP team member Xavier notes: "We all decided to trust each other, and enter the circle with our most personal experiences or feelings about ourselves. I never really shared such deep feelings within myself with others...the environment was so warm and trusting...I found that all of our differences somehow made us closer and perhaps more trusting with each other... I have never been in a group like this before in my entire life. I became friends with people who are completely opposite from me. It gave me a little more hope for the world I live in."

What Happened: Individual and Community Impact

Working collaboratively, the project team created a 70 minute video presentation focused on cultural diversity in our community. Their videos tackled a wide range of topics, including powerful personal stories addressing racism, rape, sexual preferences, and cultural stereotypes. The videos were shown in Davis churches, community centers, schools, local businesses, as well as on the public access channel. By having eighteen screenings, the DVP team received broad visibility for their work, particularly in areas not typically presented with local multicultural media programs and individuals who do not receive cable TV.

The community screenings, packed with a diverse range of people, were followed by open discussions in which community members could relate their ideas and experiences or talk about issues brought up in the videos.

through this forum, the project participants were able to facilitate a robust conversation that touched on many more community issues than were covered by the nineteen videos they presented. Just as the screenings sites varied, so too did attendance at the different community events. Some community screenings had twelve people in the audience while others had about forty attendees. On average, about twenty people attended each screening and we estimate that about 275 people total came out to the community programs.

Judging from the 164 project evaluations collected from audiences at the community screenings, the DVP had a clear community impact. Bringing diverse community members together to view videos on local issues and cultures and engage in constructive discussions about mutual needs and concerns resulted in increased:

- dialogue on a range of cultural issues and histories
- appreciation of cultural diversity in Davis, a quickly growing semi-rural community
- awareness of cultural resources available to community members
- understanding of the power and potential of self-representation through community media
- recognition of video as a tool for initiating public dialogue and forging public opinion, resulting in an increased interest in becoming involved in media arts and community television.

Based on information collected through participant questionnaires, interviews, and journal writings, the DVP experience built team member's capacity (skills, confidence, and motivation) to:

- work across differences of gender, ethnicity, age, sexual preference and cultural backgrounds towards a common goal
- make group decisions and work collectively
- analyze and produce media messages
- identify and address issues of concern in our community
- use media tools for creative self-expression and community building
- organize, publicize, and facilitate public events
- speak in front of groups, including the city council, the city human relations commission, university and local high school classes, and social action groups

Perhaps the most telling result from the project is the fact that all eight DVP participants indicated that they plan to

continue making videos as well as participate in community groups. And they have. More than a year after completing the project, at least four team members are still making videos. Three others continue to be involved in community media work. One participant, for instance, now serves on the DCTV board of directors. Another works on an Asian-American community newspaper and a third is organizing a statewide Asian American 'Zine conference. They are making a difference in their communities. One participant, for example, decided to switch from pursuing a career in criminology to become a Teacher for America in an inner-city, multi-ethnic community.

The Davis Video Project resulted in individual and community capacity building. Participants increased their media literacy skills and ability to collaborate on community endeavors. They developed a sense of self-direction and agency regarding civic affairs, as well as the confidence and ability to attain self- and group-identified goals. The project stimulated interest in civic participation using media tools among participants as well as audience members. It engaged community members around local concerns and inspired project participants to continue to make positive change in their communities. In this way, the DVP achieved the empowerment, social change, and community development goals of so many media arts training programs.

Implications

I started off this article suggesting that we consider moving beyond the current media production curriculum focus on technology. I posed the question: what would a production curriculum that encouraged empowerment, social change and community development look like? Based on my experience with the Davis Video Project, some answers to the question include: teach community organizing in addition to equipment training; include community screenings and discussions as part of the training program; use teambuilding activities to create a learning community; focus on group process by encouraging collective learning and participatory decision making. (SEE SIDEBAR) Additional considerations for such a program model include creating longer training programs and crafting programs that center on specific themes or content areas.

Media educators will immediately notice problems posed by the ideas outlined above. Longer training programs require reallocating scarce resources. Content-driven or theme-

based training necessitates a philosophical shift from the current "content neutral" training orientation of many media arts and access centers. The model also implies skill sets that many instructors may not possess, such as facilitating group process and community organizing, as well as some understanding of experiential education and participatory learning.

These issues are not insurmountable. They do, however, require creative problem solving and a willingness to explore new ideas and practices. One step towards moving in the direction of this model would be to conduct "training of trainers" to build media educators' and practitioners' knowledge and capabilities in areas such as community education and critical pedagogy — fields rich with history and research-based practices.

The production training program outlined in this article is intended as a model. Models are useful as guides and are meant to be adapted according to different needs and resources. Like all models, further testing and evaluation will help make it more effective. And the more effective our media education programs, the better able media arts advocates will be in reaching their organizational and movement-wide vision.

JESIKAH MARIA ROSS is a community development practitioner and community media training consultant based in Davis, CA. For a more detailed version of this study, jesikah can be reached at jmross@ucdavis.edu

Based on my experience with The Davis Video Project, here are suggestions for training and curriculum strategies that build participant's capacity for empowerment, social change, and community development.

o Develop a learner-centered curriculum

The learner's needs, experiences and goals are central to creating an appropriate training curriculum. Emphasis is placed on learner's developing abilities and skills to diagnose and solve their own problems or address their current issues and concerns.

o Assess training needs

Conduct a needs assessment prior to a training to identify the specific skills, information, values, etc. individuals, group or community desire to learn. Determine with participants the types of training activities that best meet their needs.

o Take on a facilitator role

The trainer facilitates a process of competency-building and self-discovery for the learners, rather than imparts knowledge. Participants are viewed as the "experts" who best understand their issues, culture, ideas, and needs. The training process is developed as a mutual learning experience.

o Focus on activities that develop analysis, planning, and problem-solving skills

Structure learning sessions as experiential problem-solving activities or tasks. Provide the simple structure of the problem-solving activity or task but allow the content to come mainly from the learners. Place an emphasis on developing action plans that focus on community impact.

o Encourage questioning and investigation of reality

Create an atmosphere where all participants (including the trainer) can express themselves freely, ask questions and learn. Provide opportunities for participants to express and understand their perceptions of reality with relation to others in the group. An atmosphere of trust and respect builds a learning community, develops participants skills in collaboration, and encourages collective effort.

o Encourage collective learning and decision-making

Place a strong emphasis on problem-solving activities that require teamwork and open peer discussion. Provide opportunities for the group to make decisions based on their learning and experience. Devote time to sharing experiences amongst the group to develop participant confidence in analyzing and finding solutions to local problems.

o Integrate evaluation throughout training

Integrate simple forms of evaluation (graffiti wall, anonymous card drop, like/dislike go around) throughout the training to ensure that the curriculum (activities, emphasis, time allocation) is meeting participant needs. Effort should be made to alter the training to satisfy participant needs as much as possible. Always address participant concerns in a public setting whether you can do something about it or not.