

Claiming Their Learning: Urban Teens and the Documentary Filmmaking Process

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At first when I heard about the last project I was ready to start skipping the last few months so I wouldn't have to deal with all the computer using...but after all this I'm really excited to get to use computers and see what new things I can learn . . . maybe someday I can teach some of my skills. – Shawn

It was more than writing [a] paper or analyzing data. Mostly it involved critical thinking. And the best ways [to] present different points of view fairly . . . without bias. – Mohamed

The students quoted above are reflecting on the process of planning, filming, editing, and producing a documentary film. The student-produced documentary film projects were the culmination of four months of focused effort and a year of collaborative inquiry within two classes: *U.S. History* and *Literature and Film*. The goal of this combined social studies and English course was for juniors and seniors to explore the connections between history and film through questions about truth, representation, and art. Projects throughout the year were designed to scaffold students' technical, artistic, and critical analysis skills while they utilized digital technology tools to synthesize, manipulate, and produce information.

Located in the heart of south Minneapolis, Roosevelt High School draws its student population from neighborhoods throughout the city. The documentary film class included Somali, Mexican, Hmong, Guianese, African American, and White students. Like their range of cultural backgrounds, the students' life and educational experiences varied widely. For Molly McCarthy Vasich, English teacher and first author of this article, this kind of diversity in a classroom was simultaneously thrilling and intimidating. How, Molly wondered, would she encourage students to draw from their personal experiences in their documentaries? Paradoxically, how would she guide students to be open-minded to different or contradicting perspectives as they developed into filmmakers? And, most significantly, how would she convince a classroom of teenagers that creating a documentary is a worthwhile pursuit?

A first-year English teacher, Molly inherited the film class from an educator who believed that student motivation occurred through critical inquiry and authentic projects. Based on the stories this educator told her, Molly gathered that the class was a success; unwilling students were transformed in the filmmaking process. Further, their completed films inspired fellow students and community members at the public film festival. Audience members raved over the high school students' professionalism and creativity. These were big shoes to fill as a new teacher, but Molly had the support of an experienced U.S. History co-teacher, Collin Quinn, and a team of researchers from the University of Minnesota including PhD candidate, Jessica Dockter Tierney, co-author of this article. The contents of this article were borne out of Molly's reflections and conversations with Jessica at end of the school year.

In alignment with NCTE's position statement and definition of 21st century literacy skills, this course demands that students demonstrate competency and ability across literacies as they synthesize complex layers of narrative, sound, and image in the filmmaking process. In addition, students must manage streams of information from both local and global sources in order to

create meaning. Students in the filmmaking class must not only become proficient with technology tools, such as iMovie and GarageBand, but also work in relationship with others to ask questions and search for answers to problems in their communities. This merging of literacies and community involvement gives the urban youth in Molly's classroom access to what Henry Jenkins calls "participatory culture." According to Jenkins:

A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). (3)

Intended to provide students increased access to technology, the documentary film class encouraged them to build the experiences, skills, and knowledge necessary to participate fully as citizens in an increasingly digital world.

Scaffolding the Film Project

Molly's expectations for students remained fluid throughout the year. One month in, she feared the worst; few students saw value in their work or school in general. They seemed to like the concept of making a movie, but they were not interested in exerting intellectual or creative effort. The first creative project, an autobiographical collage, was a complete flop; the projects were thrown together and turned in late. If the collages represented anything, they demonstrated the students' disregard for their own learning and creativity. Molly realized that she would need to convince students of the social, historical, and personal power of art and the value of the quest for knowledge in order to increase student motivation and shift the resistant attitude of the classroom. Given the context of Molly's students and her own inexperience, how was she going to manage that?

As the year progressed, each subsequent unit concluded with a summative assessment that highlighted an aspect of filmmaking. In December, Molly began a unit primarily focused on audio documentaries and podcasts from National Public Radio like "Ghetto Life 101" and "This I Believe." Unsurprisingly, the students' connection to the authentic, young narrators from "Ghetto Life 101" was a turning point for many students. The students eagerly read along with the transcript and analyzed the podcast's narrative structure. Through this exercise, the students began to realize that their daily experiences had value. Additionally, everyone seemed really excited to create podcasts using Garage Band.

In an attempt to stay true to the vision of "Ghetto Life 101," Molly decided to keep the podcast topic open. Working individually or with a partner, the students needed to podcast about a passion or something that affected them on a personal level. A handful of students appreciated this flexibility and quickly rose to the challenge. For instance, two female students produced a podcast on teenage motherhood. They included the story of one of the students, a mother herself, as well as an interview with the mother of the other student. Another set of students created a podcast that dismissed negative stereotypes about Roosevelt High School as untrue and included interviews with Roosevelt students, parents, and staff.

Overall, the podcasting project was valuable from the standpoints of both students and teacher. While students began to learn the importance of organization and teamwork in order to

meet deadlines, Molly learned that creative freedom could be highly motivating for students, even if not always successful. For example, there were some students who claimed that they were not passionate about anything and had nothing about which to podcast. As much as Molly tried to help these students brainstorm and choose a topic (any topic!), there were a few students who barely started, much less completed, the project. It was these students who worried Molly. How would they ever make a documentary film? At this point, the thought of scrapping the film festival all together definitely crossed her mind.

Still, the pressure of the film festival looming ahead and the success of previous film festivals kept the class moving forward. Although Roosevelt's principal reassured her that the festival was not part of her contract, Molly was determined to prove herself. Furthermore, she had emphasized the connections between the current content and the upcoming filmmaking process all year long. After six months of implementing lessons intended to prepare them for the final project, the thought of giving up on the students mid-year didn't feel right.

The Film Unit

Before filming their own documentaries, students viewed, critiqued, and analyzed documentary films such as *Grizzly Man*, *Hoop Dreams*, and *Food, Inc.* for both their artistic and technical elements. They were able to identify and describe filmmaking techniques such as b-roll, montage, and transition and to describe the relationship of each of these techniques with the meaning depicted in film.

When March rolled around, students seemed ready to pitch their own film topics and begin the process of producing their documentary films. They were certainly itching to get their hands on the camcorders, but the process required students to brainstorm ideas, pitch topics, and choose production groups before they could gather any footage. Annoyed that they couldn't produce their dream film without these initial steps, many resisted immediately committing to the process. Slowly, however, as the students began to conduct interviews, log and upload footage, and add transitions, music, and subtitles, their ideas manifested into moving images, and they began to claim their inner creative selves.

Molly and Jessica identified three keys to the students' transformations in the film unit: *student ownership*, *emphasizing collaboration and social interaction*, and *learning through disequilibrium*. Each is explored in turn below.

Student Ownership

Allowing the students ownership over this project came in many forms and not all of them settled easily with the students or with their teachers. The first step in letting students lead came on pitch day. Collin, the U.S. History teacher, and Molly had been talking about pitch day from the very beginning of the year, connecting each unit of the course to this day when students would state in front of their teachers and their peers, "I want to make my film about..." In preparation for presenting their pitch, students needed to look outside our classroom for stories that they could bring back to analyze, evaluate, and incorporate into their documentaries. Students were encouraged to choose topics that they were authentically curious about or on which they had a fresh perspective that could be fleshed out through research and interviews. Only five films would be made overall, so students had to convince others to join them on their projects.

The topics shared that day were a balance of the plausible and implausible, novel and cliché, impassioned and ill-passioned. Some students had clearly struggled to come up with any

idea at all, while others took pitch day very seriously, eager to share a detailed description of their dream documentary and a tentative list of people to interview. As Collin and Molly let students lead the filmmaking process from the very beginning, a number of challenges and exciting moments revealed themselves. One challenge, for example, was allowing students to move forward despite the nagging feeling between the teachers that some film topics were doomed to failure from the start.

In particular, Arianna,¹ a straight-A student, pitched the topic, “Women and The Media,” a film which would explore how the media negatively affects women. The topic appealed to Arianna as well as to a few other female students because they felt the topic was close to their lives. To her teachers, this topic was predictable and lacked focus. The film had been made already, not only by a film group the previous year, but also in feminist media circles. When Arianna pitched her idea, Molly acknowledged its currency, but she also warned her that if she decided to focus on it, her group would need to narrow it down and approach it from a fresh angle.

Heedless of the teachers’ reservations, Arianna, Stephanie, Lashay, and Nikki refused to relinquish their topic. Certainly, there was a plethora of research out there, but the problem emerged when the group tried to say something new about the issue. What could possibly be said that hadn’t been said already? Accordingly, the group had known their position before they started the film: media affects women negatively. They didn’t have an authentic research question to guide their filmmaking process. Consequently, their initial research and interview contacts seemed more appropriate for a PowerPoint than a documentary film.

Weeks later, the group expressed their realization of their topic’s shortcomings with disgruntlement and uncertainty. “Why,” Arianna asked her teachers pointedly, “Did you let us go along with our topic when you knew it wasn’t going to work? Did you want us to fail?” Her group mates nodded with frustration. Collin and Molly reminded the students of their initial warning, but they also emphasized that an important part of the course was allowing students to take the lead. While the teachers would constantly support and provide a timeline for the filmmaking process, they also had to allow the vision of each film to come from the students themselves.

Ultimately, the group was too far along to switch topics, so Molly tried to make the best of the situation. In pursuit of authentic inquiry, Molly asked, “What do you truly want to learn about the topic that you don’t already know?” After reviewing the list of perspective interviewees, the group decided to focus on what local organizations were doing to counter the media’s negative effects on women.

Another example of the challenge and excitement of allowing significant student ownership took place with Shawn, Montay, and Abdi, whose film sought to explore and compare success stories of Hispanic, Haitian, and Somali immigrants in Minnesota. A couple of weeks into filming interviews, however, this group had collected only one interview with Abdi’s brother. Shawn, a Hispanic student, planned to interview a mentor from his church, but he repeatedly failed to get the interview on tape. Feeling that they were at a crossroads, Collin suggested that the group focus their film around Abdi’s brother and interview him again to learn more about his story of coming to the United States and starting his own business. While Montay and Abdi embraced this idea, Shawn fought it. In order to frame the film as a sort of comparison between immigrant sub-cultures, Shawn insisted that the film include the Hispanic perspective.

His group decided to give him one last chance. Shawn managed to pull through; he captured an interview with his mentor, as well as an additional interview with his mentor’s

undocumented wife. Encouraged, Shawn set out later that week to film an immigrants' rights protest march in Minneapolis. The parade footage ultimately served as bookends for their documentary, setting the context for the series of immigrant success stories. In hindsight, it was perhaps the notion that his idea might fail that motivated Shawn to prove his teachers and group wrong. As his teacher, Molly was relieved that she didn't enforce her own viewpoint in an attempt to make learning "easier." Instead, Collin and Molly put a little more faith in Shawn, and he surprised everyone.

Initially, not all students were as eager and confident as Arianna and Shawn during the filmmaking process. Mohamed, a quiet and scholarly Somali student, seemed to need constant feedback – from developing his film pitch to endless reminders about editing techniques. Admittedly, Mohamed's topic, which explored the Minneapolis schools' new transportation and attendance plan, was highly complicated and controversial. Further, it didn't help that one group member was struggling with family issues and thus habitually absent, and the other group member had social and behavioral issues. Feeling stranded, Mohamed regularly turned to his teachers for advice and ideas. Well aware of the fine balance between offering service and co-opting the project, Collin and Molly hoped that extra support at the beginning of the project would later result in increased self-assurance.

As the documentary project drew closer to the film festival, Collin and Molly became spread more thinly. Soon, other groups needed guidance more than Mohamed did. After a hiatus, Molly checked in with Mohamed's progress. For the most part, she was impressed with his progress in terms of editing. However, Molly was convinced that he should rework the order of the interviews in order to capitalize on controversy (thus, making the film more interesting to viewers!). Mohamed was on board with Molly's desire to make contradictory statements explicit, until Molly ruthlessly suggested placing a set of severely opposing opinions back to back. At that point, Mohamed looked at her with wide eyes and refuted, "No, Ms. McCarthy. We cannot do that. That would make the people look badly." Mohamed's respect for his informants prevented him from turning his documentary into an overt political commentary. Additionally, this refute signified a personal transformation: once dependent on Molly for ideas and techniques, Mohamed was able to confidently call the shots on his own.

In order to truly give ownership over to our students, Collin and Molly had to let go of their preconceptions and visions for the projects. The students needed creative freedom so that they could be empowered through authentic investment in a project. As the teachers provided space and opportunity for possible failure or hard-won successes, their students began to realize they were accountable for their documentaries, their education, and ultimately, their futures.

Emphasizing Collaboration & Social Interaction

Given that students would spend the last three months of the year working closely with others in their film groups, collaboration was central to the learning that took place in the course. Students were accountable not only to each other throughout this time, but also to the final documentaries they hoped to present to community members on film festival night. As is typical in small group work, the film groups became a site of both struggle and success as each student resisted or embraced the tasks and roles before them.

Notably, students did not choose their film groups through their social or racial affiliations, despite the fact that some students maintained close ties with others in the class throughout the year. Instead, students chose their film groups based upon the topics laid out during pitch day. This, too, came with compromise on the part of some students who settled on

their second or third choices, but after brainstorming and idea mapping for a week, students seemed pleased with their group members.

Dynamics within the groups varied throughout the three months of work. Arianna, for example, was the self-appointed and member-approved leader of “Women and the Media.” She delegated tasks, conducted most of the interviews, and edited the film. One group member, Stephanie, shared at the end of the project, “I just did what Arianna told me to do.” In other film groups, however, the sharing of tasks was more evident. Montay, Abdi, and Shawn, for example, each took turns editing the film footage. When one group member felt that he was doing more than his share, he would get up from the keyboard and force another member into the driver’s seat. Over time, this group began to work quite closely together, consulting each other about the smallest details of the film, and as we describe later, becoming close friends in the process. For yet others, collaboration meant becoming a leader in unexpected ways. Mohamed, the quiet and scholarly Somali student we described earlier, often had to call or text his partner, Emily, in order to remind her to return equipment or conduct an interview. In fact, Emily’s instabilities often got in the way of the project, and in certain moments, only Mohamed could convince her to complete tasks that even Collin and Molly could not persuade her to do.

One of the greatest challenges for students throughout the process of making the film was initiating and navigating contact with individuals outside the school who might lend expertise to their films. As indicated in the podcast project earlier in the year, students in this course were aware of their school’s marginalized status within the district. To them, being a Roosevelt student meant that no one believed in their value as community members. While students were articulate and impassioned about defending their identities as capable students and valued citizens within the walls of the building, it meant something quite different for them to perform this identity outside the school. For this reason, cold-calling, emailing, or going up to people on the street was a daunting prospect. Although they hadn’t planned on it, Collin and Molly spent a great deal of class time helping students script their phone conversations and edit emails. At these times, the lack of cultural capital among the students was apparent, but so was the students’ appreciation for their teachers’ explicitness in regards to strategies for professional communication, a practice Collin and Molly had wrongly assumed the students would already have mastered. Stephanie, for example, expressed that her favorite part of the process was “setting up the interviews and sending emails” – something which she had never been asked to do before.

Social interaction with community members also created valuable opportunities for students to gain deep understandings about social issues around them. Abdi, Montay, and Shawn took their cameras to a diverse area of the city to capture immigrants’ stories for their film. Again and again, the men and women they approached responded kindly but refused to be interviewed. On some occasions, individuals who agreed to answer questions later changed their minds upon seeing the cameras. Although these three young men were frustrated by the setback this created, each expressed a nuanced and mature understanding of the reasons behind these rejections. Shawn stated, “I know where they’re coming from...they have a lot of ideas about what can happen.” Abdi, too, expressed a deep respect for the immigrant experience. When asked about some revealing statements made by undocumented immigrants in his film, Abdi conveyed respect for these individuals in responding, “they know better than we do,” which suggested that he trusted his participants to make their own decisions about the risks involved in telling their stories. In alignment with in NCTE’s Definition of 21st Century Literacies, Shawn and Abdi attended to the ethical responsibilities required by the complex literacies involved in

this process and demonstrated empathy and reverence for individuals based upon their social interactions with them.

At times, the social interaction required of this project also provided the opportunity for students to exhibit agency in ways that surprised their teachers. Mohamed, whose group depicted the recent busing shift in the Minneapolis district, set up an interview with a then-member of the school board. When reviewing his interview questions, Collin and Molly were struck by the boldness of his approach. Despite his quiet demeanor and being silenced by comments from students about his strong Somalian accent, Mohamed planned to ask some hard-hitting questions, such as “Minneapolis public schools typically have poor performances on test scores, so will changing school options help to improve test scores? Why? How?” and “You say this isn’t about the budget. Then what is it really about?” Not only did Mohamed score the most high-profile interview of the year, but he also asked questions of a school board member that would have been too uncomfortable for some adults to ask! Through the course of this project, Mohamed became fearless – or perhaps he was all along, and we were seeing it for the first time.

Each of the above examples demonstrates how collaboration with group members and social interaction with community members were integral to the learning and growth that took place during this project. Across their final reflection essays, students described working with others inside and outside of class as both the most challenging and ultimately rewarding aspect of the project. As their teachers, Collin and Molly hope these experiences helped prepare students for life after high school as confident, informed and literate adults.

Learning Through Disequilibrium

Putting a stake in a project is not easy. To do so requires an emotional investment that many students are not accustomed to making in a school setting. During the first weeks of school, Molly got the impression that her students assumed the documentary class would be an easy A, and making a film simply required toting expensive camera gear around the city. However, as the class worked through a series of creative projects that required critical inquiry and digital technology skills, it became apparent that deep insight often manifested during mental and emotional disequilibrium. Learning to deal with frustration and uncertainty, students began to appreciate the internal rewards of the learning and creative processes.

Highly successful in school, Arianna didn’t settle for anything less than an A. In most classrooms, Arianna was the teacher’s dream student. However, as the class began working on the documentary project, Arianna’s identity as an “A” student conflicted with the openness of the project. Initially, her dedication to the project was not an emotional investment; rather, it was motivated by the final grade. In this frame of mind, Arianna experienced constant frustration and disillusionment with her film, her group members, and her teachers.

When Collin and Molly suggested revision on the group’s film topic, Arianna nearly exploded and then gave up. She wanted them to tell her exactly what to do so that she could get an A in the class. When they refused, she claimed Collin and Molly were terrible teachers who wanted her to fail. Reflecting on this moment in the process, she wrote, “It started out great; we knew what we were going to do and what needed to be done, but then next thing you know, we hit rock bottom. We had no idea what to do and where to take the project.” When Arianna eventually began to feel secure about the topic again, her group members began to resent her desire to be in control. Arianna’s long time friend, Stephanie, continued to follow her directions, but Lashay and Nikki allied and refused to communicate with Arianna. Instead of encouraging the girls to participate, Arianna, grade-motivated, saw it as an opportunity to explicitly compare

her “A” work to their lack of work all together. It was also at this time that she began referring to the film as “my film.”

Although Arianna did not completely reverse her character as the filmmaking progressed, Molly does believe that Arianna did experience a glimmering of enlightenment in regard to her attitude towards her education. Arianna realized that her frustration with the filmmaking process was a result of her perfectionism. The filmmaking process, like many creative pursuits, is uncertain. The end result isn't a sure thing because footage, interviews, technology, and working with others are not predictable. In a final reflection following the project, Arianna said, “I am so used to step-by-step instructions because that's what I'm used to and that's how I learn...I will not settle for less than an A and no one is going to get in my way of that...In the end, I wouldn't say that I wish I had a different group or even wished I did this on my own. In the long run, this helped me to try my hardest to get others involved.”

Students also experienced disequilibrium as their cultural worldviews were challenged. Despite Shawn's determination to include the Hispanic experience in his group's documentary, he reflected that the ultimate lesson he learned in the process was one of cross-cultural understanding and acceptance. Having tea during an interview in Abdi's brother's shop was Shawn's first inside perspective of the Somali community. Describing this experience to his classmates, Shawn bravely admitted to viewing non-Hispanics differently before he started the film project. He said, “At first, when I look at somebody that wasn't my race I would think they are annoying and weird. After talking to people and interviewing them, I can't just be judging people because they may be thinking the same things about me and my race.” As the group wove together tales of immigrant journeys and successes, the three students discovered the value of listening to other perspectives. Further, they realized that the immigrant populations might have more in common than they previously imagined.

As Shawn spoke, Abdi and Montay nodded in understanding. To be sure, the relationship that developed between these three students might have been partially responsible for Shawn's transformation. With different cultural and racial identities, Shawn, Abdi, and Montay discovered common ground as they exchanged perspectives and opinions within the framework of the documentary film. In fact, the group became so comfortable with their differences that they shifted from politeness to joking about race, culture, and identity. Race and ethnicity were no longer topics that needed to be silenced in order to protect self-worth; instead, the group was willing to challenge the racial inequality and stereotypes through candid conversation, open-mindedness, and reflection.

Due to their commitment to the documentaries, the students learned to accept disequilibrium and embrace uncertainty. Their role as filmmakers and their expectations for the project were challenged and modified as they researched, filmed, and edited footage. When new stories, insights, and problems revealed themselves, the students learned to take them in stride and incorporate them into the films. In this way, though visible only to the filmmakers themselves, and perhaps to their teachers, the finished documentaries contained traces of the young filmmakers' internal and social transformations.

Conclusion

Located within a system set on increased standardization, rank, and test scores, our documentary film class is likely considered an oddity. The culminating project is not a close analysis paper or a multiple-choice test. To be sure, there is no right answer. Yet, at some point during the construction of ten-minute documentary films, our students formed deep investments

in their learning. Accordingly, they dismissed traditional notions of “student” and “education.” By proving that they had something to say about their world, students began to view their education as an opportunity to overcome the stereotypes assigned to them by misinformed teachers and community members. Their identities as “learners” became entangled and quickly pushed aside as they assumed the intertwining roles of filmmakers, historians, and storytellers. As students claimed learning as their own, the filmmaking process empowered and inspired the students themselves, their interviewees, and the film festival viewers. At last willing to defend the value of critical inquiry and creativity, our students realized that their education reached far beyond the confines of the classroom.

Note

1. All student names are pseudonyms.

Works Cited

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