

Youth-Produced Media in Community Change Efforts

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Using digital media skills, youth have found an increasingly popular medium to tell stories about their lives, hopes and communities. Some educators have embraced this trend, viewing youth-produced media as a way to impart technical skills, build self-confidence and connect young citizens to their communities. In some cases youth and their adult allies use youth-produced media to articulate a youth perspective on key public issues, with the goal of fostering needed community change.

In the Sacramento region, Sierra Health Foundation launched the REACH Youth Program, designed to enhance youth participation in community decision making and policy change. In the second year of the program, the Center for Community School Partnerships (CCSP) at UC Davis, a REACH technical assistance and training partner, introduced a series of video production workshops designed to increase community awareness of issues deemed important by local youth. CCSP project leaders trained youth from four REACH communities in an approach that integrates research, interviews, music and computer graphics to produce a video documentary. The documentaries were then screened at a number of local and regional venues.

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About the REACH Issue Brief Series

In 2006, Sierra Health Foundation began the REACH youth development program, committing \$8 million to support the healthy development of youth in the Greater Sacramento, California, region. As a centerpiece of the larger program, seven communities in the region were awarded grants from 2006 to 2010 to assess community conditions, build community capacity for change and implement strategies that increase meaningful supports and opportunities for youth. Coalition development and direct, meaningful engagement of youth are key REACH objectives. Committed to making REACH a learning opportunity, Sierra Health Foundation asked an evaluation team from the University of California, Davis to assess the outcomes of the program and to document lessons learned. This issue brief is one of a series developed to share outcomes and lessons on topics of interest. For more information on the REACH program, visit Sierra Health Foundation's web site, www.sierrahealth.org. For information on the evaluation, visit the UC Cooperative Extension California Communities Program web site, <http://groups.ucanr.org/CCP/index.cfm>.

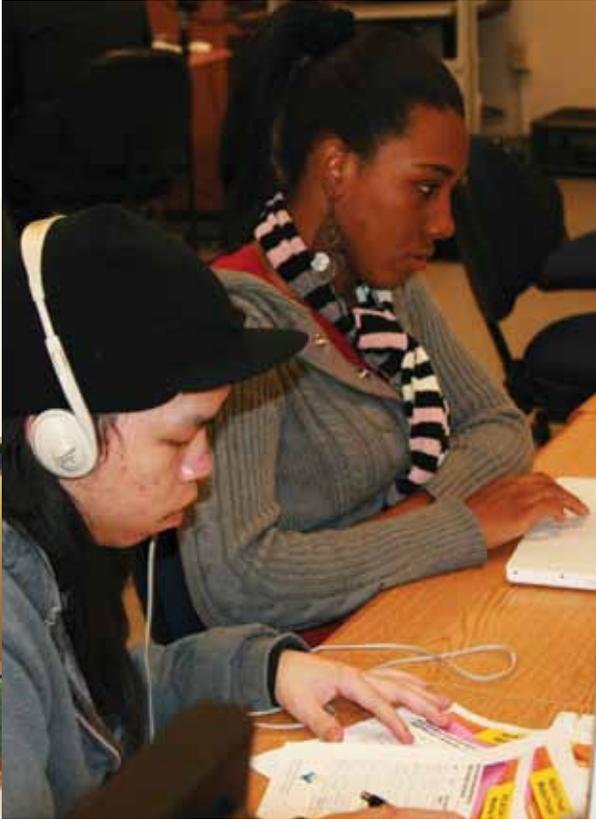
There are a number of excellent resources that focus on the production of youth-produced media, including suggestions for the process and documentation of outcomes for participating youth.¹ Comparatively little attention is paid to how youth-produced media is interpreted and understood by its audiences and the extent to which it influences policy change. The purpose of this issue brief is to explore what happened after production, as the youth-produced videos were used as part of the community change efforts

of REACH coalitions. We document what participating youth, adult allies and project leaders learned about using youth-produced documentaries as part of a community change strategy. We provide a brief description of the project, summarize reported benefits and discuss challenges and opportunities associated with this approach to involving youth in community change.²

1. For example, see: Listen Up! (<http://listenup.org/>), YouthLearn (<http://www.youthlearn.org/>), Academy for Educational Development (<http://www.aed.org/>), and Youth Media Reporter (<http://www.youthmediareporter.org/>).

2. Data used in this study was collected as part of the larger evaluation of the REACH Program. Data collection included participant observation; semi-structured phone interviews with TA providers, program participants and community members; and review of documents, media, correspondence, online materials and program records. Targeted interviews with 13 adult allies, project staff and youth were conducted specifically for this study.

Youth participants of the REACH Youth Media Project worked on their documentaries in a computer lab on the UC Davis campus.



Background

A team of two staff members from the UC Davis Center for Community School Partnerships provided project leadership. Their roles included conceptualizing the overall project, recruiting participants, designing the curriculum, identifying and coordinating technical resources, facilitating workshops and organizing and promoting the community screening. The curriculum was adapted in part from activities developed by the Educational Video Center.

Project leaders believed strongly that youth should take full leadership and ownership of the overall development and production of the documentaries. The goal was to provide youth with a venue for telling their stories, sharing their hopes and concerns and engaging in conversations about their communities—all from a unique youth perspective. As such, the workshops helped prepare youth for multiple responsibilities including collecting data, conducting interviews, gathering media footage, writing scripts, developing storyboards and editing the documentary. Adult allies from each community joined with project leaders to support the youth, lending administrative, technical and creative help and coordinating transportation to and from meetings.

Approximately 20 youth attended the first project meeting in August 2008. The youth came in groups of three to six from four of the seven REACH coalitions—Galt, Meadowview, South Sacramento and Woodland. Over the next 10 months, youth worked intensively within their teams to identify and document a community issue youth cared about. They conducted interviews with city council members, police officers, priests, parents and peers, among others. Some wrote and performed skits to dramatize the issue. Finally, youth embedded text and titles on their video footage and imported music to help tell the stories.

Products

The finished documentaries premiered at a local theater in Sacramento, following a dinner at which families and friends of the youth had a chance to meet community stakeholders, foundation staff and university representatives. In the ensuing months, the documentaries were screened at multiple venues across the region, including school assemblies, churches and a number of community

meetings. They also are available on the foundation's web site.

The documentaries touched on critical concerns identified by the participating youth:

- The Galt Area Youth Coalition focused on the lack of supports and opportunities in their relatively small community. They interviewed youth and community leaders who identified a need for a safe facility where youth could congregate after school.
- The Woodland Coalition for Youth documented a growing teen pregnancy rate, especially among Latino girls. The documentary sparked discussion about Family Life programs in schools and was the occasion for a partnership with the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Campaign, a program of the Woodland School District.
- Based on a survey of 170 high school students, youth from Sacramento's ACT Meadowview Partnership focused their documentary on the importance of role models and mentors in the lives of youth.
- The Youth Leadership Council of the South Sacramento Coalition for Future Leaders explored the impact of state budget cuts to public education. Their documentary explained how funding for public education is allocated and how cuts would impact students, programs, school faculty and staff.

Benefits Reported By Participants

Participants in this project learned that youth-produced media requires considerable resources, including time, funding and training for both youth and adults. But it also can produce many rewards. As one respondent said, "It's a lot of work, it's a lot of commitment and it's a lot of time, but it's well worth it."

New Skills

Youth reported new technical and social skills. They felt more comfortable participating in discussions and more confident speaking up in adult settings, such as school board and city council meetings. They expressed an enhanced disposition to think and act more independently. Young people also described a deeper understanding about community issues, the roles adults play in the community and the complexity involved in community change.

Deeper Understanding

Adults developed a deeper understanding and appreciation for youth's expertise and capacity. Most adults were stirred by the youth's commitment to completing the project. They expressed, with some emotion, pride and respect for how youth achieved their goals. Some adults found youth's candor and honesty energizing. They valued the behind-the-scenes access to the places and conversations captured in the documentaries, settings many adults typically don't have access to for no other reason than they are grown-ups. Some adults described themselves as technical "dinosaurs" and marveled at the youth's deftness with and fearlessness of media and technology.

New Information

Project leaders were able to test a curriculum that might be adapted to use in other communities. They developed relationships with REACH youth that have led to subsequent youth media projects. In one of these, youth are using their newfound media skills to conduct video interviews with youth involved in REACH coalitions, documenting what has been valuable to them about the program. The REACH-related media work also is informing a broader regional study of youth well-being and disparities conducted by UC Davis researchers affiliated with the Center for Regional Change.

In addition to these documented outcomes for individual participants, we wanted to learn whether and how the documentaries contributed to community change. The project provided an opportunity to deepen insights into the challenges facing youth-produced media projects and how they can be more effective in fostering desired community change. The next section summarizes some of what participants accomplished and learned in the course of their work.

Outcomes, Challenges Encountered and Lessons Learned

Youth participants, adult allies and workshop leaders identified three key lessons:

- Building strategic relationships and organizing events is part of documentary production.

- Be prepared for emotional responses from adult viewers.
- Turnover of youth and adults is inevitable—plan ahead.

Building Strategic Relationships and Organizing Events is Part of Documentary Production

Finding an audience for youth-produced media beyond the parents, families and other significant people in the lives of youth can be difficult (Dahl, 2009), but distributing these stories is essential if the goal is to educate, advocate or mobilize. Screenings need to be organized strategically to create opportunities for productive discussion. While it can be tempting to view the production of the documentary as the end of the work, from a community change perspective it is just the beginning. Nicole Pinkard, founder of the Digital Youth Network and a DePaul University professor summarizes the relevant lesson as follows: "The purpose of the media isn't just to create it, but it's to create it for what purpose, for what audience, and what are the conversations that you create around it." (McArthur Foundation, 2009)

At least two of the REACH coalitions were quite active in organizing and promoting the documentaries after their production. Each was still active at the time of this writing, nearly 10 months after the public premiere of the videos.

In Woodland, youth decided on a goal of expanding the existing offering of Family Life courses at the Woodland middle schools. Youth prepared and practiced a five-minute presentation to the Woodland Parent Teacher Association, with assistance from the local Toastmasters club, a nonprofit organization helping people practice public speaking skills. The youth also planned to make presentations to their principals, health teachers, church groups and youth clubs. Their presentation included a petition asking for expanded Family Life education.

In Galt, youth and adults saw the opportunity to use their documentary to increase awareness about the lack of supports and opportunities for youth. The documentary was featured in the local paper and screened in front of the city council and school board. Youth and adults participating in these activities shared

some thoughts about post-production activities:

- Be attuned to the timing of production and post-production activities. In this project, media training took place over the course of the school year, which culminated with a public premiere in May—the end of the school year. With school out of session, momentum faltered, and by fall some youth participants had graduated or moved on to other pursuits.
- The size of screenings can help deter or facilitate discussion. “One of the things that we’ve learned is that it’s more safe when we have smaller groups. You have more of a discussion because [the audience] really gets into it and if you have a huge group then nobody really wants to ask the questions.”

Be Prepared for Emotional Responses from Adult Viewers

Youth-produced media creates opportunities for audiences to see and hear stories not typically featured in mainstream media. The images, music and stories youth choose to use can sometimes provoke strong reactions from adult audience members. In Galt, some community members who viewed the documentary were upset by the way the community was depicted. They also disagreed with youth about the origin of the problem. One adult interviewed said the message the documentary sent was “off base in my opinion about what’s going on here.”

Organizers of youth media projects need to be prepared to use occasions like this to deepen the conversation between youth and adults and to enable youth to practice conflict resolution and problem-solving skills. They also may want to open screenings with overviews that share the spirit with which the documentary was produced, particularly if it is an opinion-based piece (Kellogg Foundation, 2006).

What emerged in Galt became viewed as a success story. The documentary ended up achieving multiple goals, one of which was to begin a dialogue for youth and adults about supports and opportunities available in the community for young people. One member of the community who was angry after seeing the documentary transformed that frustration into opportunity, deciding



The REACH Youth Media Project documentaries premiered at a local theater in Sacramento.



to participate in future media projects. “They achieved their goal because they got me going and that’ll get a whole bunch of other people going,” the respondent said. “If the goal was to show how powerfully we can bridge the gap [between youth and adults] with the media, it was totally successful because it has gotten me really excited and thinking about using media in powerful ways.”

We learned that some adults deliberately refrained from talking with youth about their negative reactions to the documentary. When asked why, one respondent said, “I kept my opinion guarded because I don’t want to hurt the children.” Project organizers need to carefully consider if and how they can create a safe space for this type of discussion, so that the emotional energy generated is channeled into productive discussion and action.

Turnover of Youth and Adults is Inevitable— Plan Ahead

During this youth media project, both youth and adult turnover were an issue. Some of the causes of youth turnover are similar to those facing all youth-related

projects, including competition from family or relationship obligations, jobs and other after-school and extracurricular activities. One coordinator said, “We don’t get a real consistency with the kids. If there’s a date or job or appointment [we’re] low on the priority list.” But youth-produced media projects also put special demands on participants that make turnover more of an issue. For example, these projects require that youth follow through with assigned tasks based on a group timetable. They also present a steep learning curve—youth are learning new skills at each meeting and making creative and technical decisions that impact content. If youth miss one or more meetings, they can quickly fall behind.

When youth drop out before the project is completed, organizers must struggle to avoid two possibilities. If new youth cannot be attracted to the project, remaining youth participants may become overwhelmed as they take on their former colleagues’ roles and responsibilities, threatening both quality and morale. If new youth are recruited, they face a steep learning curve to catch up with the existing group, and there is no guarantee that they will be as committed to the content and agenda of the work as the youth they replace.

Consistent adult support lends stability to projects and helps broaden and sustain youth participation during the production process and after the documentary’s premiere. By contrast, turnover among adult allies also can affect continuity and momentum. When an adult staff member leaves the project and the youth stay on, multiple scenarios can emerge that impact the quality of the project. For example, the new coordinator may not be as invested in the documentary and fail to fully support youth participants, or youth may feel less connected to the new coordinator and stop participating. Having overall project responsibility, project leaders found themselves assuming many of the roles originally envisioned for the community youth allies. They worked hard to connect with the youth and support their participation, which included picking them up and dropping them off after meetings.

The Woodland Coalition for Youth was resourceful in its approach to solving the challenges associated with turnover. Their adult coordinator left the position during the project and a number of youth dropped



Youth and adult participants of the REACH Youth Media Project celebrated their work after making final edits to their documentaries.

out because of competing activities. The new adult coordinator identified and approached a like-minded ally, the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Campaign. The campaign had been working with a group of high school-aged youth concerning teen pregnancy for several years. The two groups decided to partner on the documentary. Campaign youth had a deep level of knowledge about teen pregnancy and were able to assist with content development, research, interview guides and interviews. The coalition youth contributed to technical production, helping to edit the documentary.

The project was completed in time for the public premiere and the two organizations are now using the documentary to pursue separate agendas, both of which include increasing awareness about teen pregnancy in Woodland. It has been screened at community events and in the schools, and has been included in a high school health class.

Conclusion

As demonstrated during REACH, youth-produced media can provide rich opportunities for youth to learn more about their communities, to highlight youth voice and their stories, and to strengthen relationships between youth and adults.

Key Recommendations:

If organizers of youth-produced media have the goal of catalyzing community change, we recommend the following:

- No one-size-fits-all model exists for youth-produced media—the community setting and the context surrounding chosen issues matters.
- Be aware of the considerable resources required during the different phases of the project (including post production). These include time, funding, equipment, technical support and training for both youth and adults.
- Identify and work with partners who broaden the community base of support for the project.
- Think strategically about the message youth want to broadcast and anticipate how that message will be interpreted by different community members.
- Strategize about how the documentary can be used to make change at an organizational or community-wide level.
- Be intentional about activities that allow youth to practice identifying and talking to leaders in their neighborhoods, schools and communities, especially those that are in a position to inform and advance your campaign.
- To the extent possible, look beyond the technical lessons associated with media production and include training that develops skills in community organizing, such as one-on-one interviews to identify problems and leaders, power analysis, enlisting allies and political strategy.

For More Information

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