

# youth media citizenship beyond "youth voice"

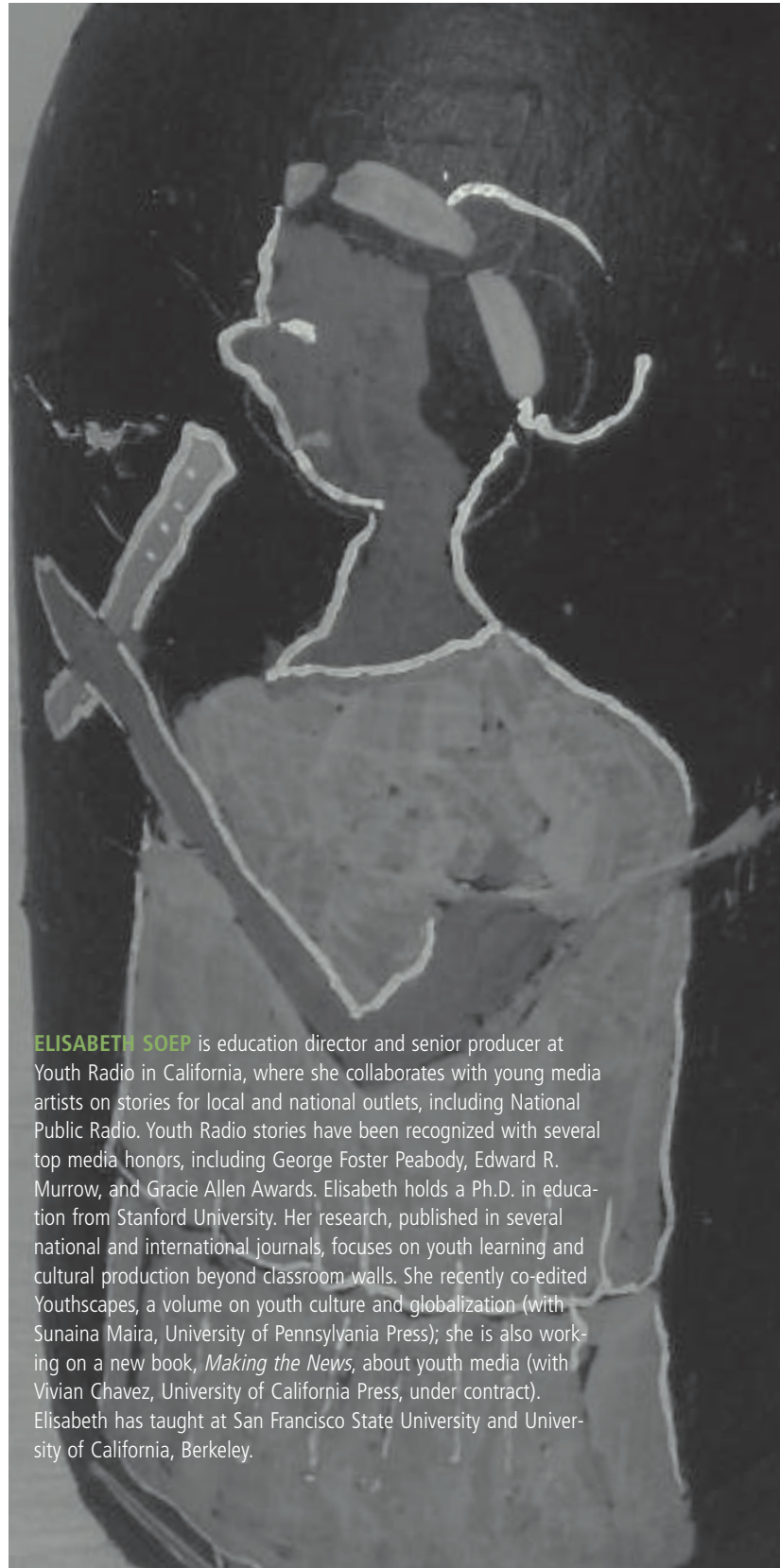
by Elisabeth Soep

Young people's relationship to citizenship in a democratic society is full of contradiction.

Teenagers in the United States can join the military before they are allowed to vote or consume alcohol. On certain issues, young people are seen, at best, as junior citizens, incapable of acting effectively on their own behalf. Other issues, by contrast, trigger fears that young people enjoy excessive power to effect change and disrupt society—fears that suggest a rationale for boosting surveillance and social control. Such scholars as

Nestor Garcia Canclini (2001) even argue that young people today are more likely to attribute a sense of citizenship to the brands and media they consume rather than to abstract rules of democracy or to participation in conventional civic institutions. The globalization of youth culture further complicates young people's relationship to democracy as traditionally conceived. More and more young people define themselves as cosmopolitan citizens, connected through popular culture, digital technologies, and migration histories to social geographies outside their own local and national contexts (Maira & Soep, 2005). Despite these new forms of citizenship in youth culture, however, one familiar image of young people remains unchanged: They continue to be seen as disengaged from organized efforts to lead and represent their communities.

Those of us who work with young people, particularly in community-based youth organizations, know that this image of apathy is deeply flawed. These organizations are fueled by the opposite of youth apathy: youth agency, expressed



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through active participation in policymaking and community organizing and through the exercise of fundamental rights such as free speech.

The media figures centrally in any link between youth and democracy. From mainstream network and cable broadcasts to online blogs, a proliferating array of news sources shapes young people's understandings of the political process. The standards of news media are undeniably in flux, perhaps even crisis. Teenagers and young adults in the U.S. are forming civic identities amid widely publicized scandals surrounding reporting on their president's military record and on treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, as well as press protections allotted to non-traditional journalists and anonymous sources. Meanwhile, many in the mainstream media are committed to reaching young audiences, yet their efforts often amount, in the words of producer and media scholar Robert Calo, to "dressing their anchors in leather and shooting them at night on an urban rooftop. They're caught in the trap of their own making, fearful to lose the audience they have for one they don't know how to reach" (personal communication, January 5, 2005).

Crucially, young people are joining these debates by participating in the burgeoning youth media movement. They are not only consuming stories produced by adults but also creating their own stories. Youth media is typically defined as media conceived, developed, and produced by young people (Campbell, Hoey, & Perlman, 2001). The primary goals of the youth media movement are youth learning, community and workforce development, civic engagement, creative expression, and social justice (Buckingham, 2003; Fleetwood, 2005; Goldfarb, 2002; Goodman, 2003; Kafai & Resnick, 1996; Sefton-Green, 2000; Tyner, 1998). Youth media education sometimes privileges *media literacy*: the capacity to deconstruct the manufactured images, sounds, and narratives young people encounter as members of a key market. The youth media movement also often includes *media advocacy*—the use of television, radio, print, and the Internet, as well as such underground resources as stickering and postering campaigns, to sway public opinion, support community organizing efforts, advance policies, and improve social capital (Wallack, Dorfman, Themba, & Jernigan, 1993).

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My primary focus in this article is the dimension of the youth media movement focused on hands-on production in non-school spaces—sites where young people generate original stories for significant audiences. School-based media education programs certainly exist throughout the U.S., supported in the last several years

by the development of national media literacy standards and statewide efforts to integrate creative media production into the curriculum (Tyner, 1998). However, sites operating outside of schools, especially independent afterschool programs, are a key force in the youth media movement. Such programs provide a vehicle for young people to tell stories, using dialogue, reflection, and action to convey their truth.

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Youth media programs operating outside of schools, such as the one I focus on here, often deal with democracy on at least two levels—as both content for stories and context for teaching and learning. Young people in these sites take on some of democracy's most pressing themes and issues, while working in an environment that promotes active participation, involvement in decision making, and constant vigilance toward matters of equity. These programs, then, have the potential to do more than simply foster "youth voice," as they are often described in literature touting their virtues. At the same time, they contain tensions and contradictions that emerge in any environment aiming to model democratic practices. My research indicates four features in community-based afterschool media programs that apply democracy in this double sense: peer teaching, collegial pedagogy, multiple outlets, and applied agency. These four features emerged in my ethnographic study of Youth Radio, a single program in the context of the broader youth media movement.

### **Context: Youth Radio**

My participatory ethnographic research was based at Youth Radio, a youth media pioneer now in its fifteenth

year of operation. Youth Radio is a nonprofit afterschool organization in which young people produce stories for local and national broadcasts on radio, television, and online outlets. The program is located in the San Francisco Bay Area, with bureaus in Los Angeles, Washington, and Atlanta. Youth Radio students, primarily working-class youth and youth of color, are recruited from high schools in poor urban districts, as well as through outreach to students in schools marked by vast differences in opportunities to learn afforded to those in remedial versus honors classes.

Young people are selected for the program that meets in Youth Radio's Berkeley production facility through a process that includes an application and interview. The selection process is designed to assess prospective students' interest in the program and to ensure that the incoming class is diverse in terms of ethnicity and gender and is composed predominantly of students from working-class families and those who attend under-resourced public schools. Students take a 12-week introductory class, which is offered four times a year. They come to Youth Radio after school twice a week to learn basic media skills in web, video, music production, and radio, while producing and hosting a two-hour live show called *Youth in Control* that airs on local public radio every Friday night. Most students who graduate from the introductory class return for another 12 weeks of more advanced training, which also takes place two afternoons a week for two hours. In this phase, students specialize in a particular area—for example, engineering, music or video production, news and commentary writing, or web design and programming. Having completed these two course sessions, students are then eligible to become interns at Youth Radio, initially on a volunteer basis, and, after three months, in paid positions.

When staff members recognized that a significant number of young people who could benefit from the program could not, for a variety of reasons, make their way to the Berkeley facility, they launched a series of outreach programs at local public schools, community-based organizations, group



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homes, and juvenile detention facilities. These outreach programs essentially replicate key dimensions of the on-site classes, including on-air and online broadcast opportunities. All learning experiences at Youth Radio maintain a dual focus on professional standards and youth development, supporting the latter through a comprehensive program that both emphasizes critical media literacy and carves pathways into higher education and meaningful work.

Students who want to produce commentaries and feature stories for broadcast on National Public Radio and other outlets apply for internships in Youth Radio's newsroom. Youth Radio students have produced stories on topics includ-

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speech in U.S. classrooms in an era of war and homeland security, reflections from young soldiers returning from the war in Iraq, and debates about the effects of the youth vote on the most recent presidential election.

In the newsroom, students research topics, conduct interviews, record scenes and ambient sound, write scripts, and produce stories that air on public radio shows whose audiences number in the millions. Every step in this media production process is highly collaborative. Adult producers and peer teachers work with young people to prepare interview questions and outlines; in some cases, adult producers accompany young reporters in the field. Students might interview a school superintendent, record the scene outside a juvenile courtroom, or tape a frank conversation with a young soldier returning from the war in Iraq. Later, young people mix their pieces in the studio. Throughout a given story's development, teens consult with peers and adult producers in weekly editorial meetings, pitching ideas, raising questions, and reporting progress on especially challenging projects.

Youth Radio students hold themselves to journalistic standards of accuracy, rigor, and truth value. Like

their adult counterparts, they engage in heated debates about what "balanced coverage" means and how "truthfulness" applies to unorthodox storytelling techniques. Because they are being trained to cover stories about democracy, young people in programs such as Youth Radio can inform researchers' understanding of the extent to which democratic principles inform the learning environments that take hold in community-based organizations. Missing in our current understanding of youth media programs is a clear sense of how they organize themselves as democratic institutions while they simultaneously enable young people to produce stories about the status of democracy in difficult times.

### Research Methods

In order to pursue such an understanding, I have studied Youth Radio since 1999, using participant-observation, interviews, and focus groups. This fieldwork builds on research I have carried out nationally over 14 years, independently and in collaborative sponsored studies, on youth learning environments beyond the classroom (Davis, Soep, Maira, Remba, & Putnoi, 1993; Heath, 2001; Heath & Soep, 1998; Soep, 2005a & b; Soep, forthcoming). My present approach distinguishes itself from earlier phases in my work by virtue of my sustained, engaged role in Youth Radio. As a senior producer in Youth Radio's newsroom and the organization's education director, I collaborate daily with young people to produce local and national stories as well as develop and assess programs and curricula with other adult staff.

Carrying out original research from within a youth organization undeniably brings unique challenges. The deadline-driven pace of youth media work can, for instance, make it difficult to jot field notes when a frantic young person needs me to help cut five excess minutes from a public affairs show due to the station by 6:00 p.m. The challenge of carrying out participation-heavy ethnographic research seems more than balanced, however, by the insights that come from direct, intense involvement in the democratic learning environment I'm studying. Moreover, as colleagues, the young people and adults at Youth Radio participate in the research in ways that immeasurably enrich the project. Staff members produce their own field notes on key learning moments in their departments, and we find ourselves regularly engaged in spontaneous conversations about questions, tensions, and findings coming up in the research. This model of participatory

ethnography by no means eradicates the power differentials built into research (Chávez, Duran, Baker, Avila, & Wallerstein, 2003). One group of young people, for example, recently questioned why their real names should be erased from my publications, even though I am writing about, and clearly benefiting from, their creative work as artists and media producers in a field in which they already have to fight constantly for recognition. An effort to engage democratic practices in the research process itself, and to consider critically what to do when those ideals fall short, seems consistent with the overall intent of this inquiry into community-based education as democracy in action.

### Youth Media Movement

Democratic ideals resonate throughout the history of the youth media movement, if not always in straightforward ways (see Sefton-Green & Soep, forthcoming; Soep & Chavez, forthcoming). The origins of the movement stretch back to the 1950s. According to Goldfarb (2002), at that time countries including the U.S. and France initiated dubious media education programs in an effort to establish themselves as “benevolent” leaders by introducing new technologies to classrooms and other settings in American Samoa and West Africa. Goldfarb’s analysis is somewhat unusual in the literature because he focuses on the colonial underpinnings of these early transnational media education efforts.

More typically, researchers cite the 1960s and 1970s as the beginning of a shift from teaching *about* media to teaching *through* media in the U.S., in an attempt to promote active and critical citizenship. In an essay originally published in 1961, video artist Dee Dee Halleck (2002) argued that teaching moviemaking to children, with their “natural curiosity and vigorous imaginations,” was one of the best ways to combat the public’s “duped acceptance” of mass media messages (p. 50). Soon, video tools and other forms of technology made production both cheaper and more portable (Goodman, 2003). At the same time, the civil rights, student, and anti-war movements supported a view of community-based media as an “empowerment” project mobilizing new tools for production and access (Fleetwood, 2005). The 1980s saw a shift away from community empowerment and critique to a focus on

fostering media literacy, as well as “marketable skills,” through vocational training, including, crucially, training provided by community-based afterschool programs (Goldfarb, 2002; Goodman, 2003). The increased visibility of youth violence that made headlines in the 1990s, as well as new public attention to political movements such as “girl power” feminisms (Kearney, 2003) and HIV/AIDS activism (Juhasz, 1995), sparked interest in teaching alternative media production, outside of classrooms, as a way to enable young people to tell stories about issues affecting their own lives and communities, on their own terms. The youth media movement today, like other educational efforts that aim to bridge young people’s experience in and out of school, is drawing increased research attention in light of growing interest in the creative and political lives of youth outside classrooms (see, for example, Buckingham, 2003; Heath, 2001; Hull, 2003; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Mahiri, 2004).

The complex positioning of youth media projects like Youth Radio as “in-between” sites of education, operating somewhere between school culture and youth culture, reveals itself in daily practice. Young people use the non-school space of Youth Radio to produce stories, for example, exploring race and class breakdowns in Advanced Placement classes; they incorporate original hip-hop beats into radio shows dealing with topics ranging from civil liberties to statutory rape. While working at Youth

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Radio, writer and community outreach associate Jesús Quintero captured one such “in-between” moment among a group of incarcerated young men at a local juvenile detention camp, one of Youth Radio’s long-standing outreach sites, on the first day of the program.

Mike hands out Youth Radio questionnaires. While students fill them out, a young man covers his paper as though cheating, clutching his pencil scarred with fresh teeth marks. As I explain the purpose of the questionnaire, I notice this kid eating away, turning the pencil as though eating an ear of corn. Finally, Pencil Eater asks, “Can I go to the bathroom?”

I tell him, “It’s cool, go handle it, blood.” I am tempted to say, “Be back,” because I sense that he

doesn't want to be here. Maybe the rooms of Juvenile Hall are less intimidating than classrooms for Pencil Eater. Seven minutes later and he's still hiding, perhaps imagining that he's the pencil, wanting to disappear, bite by bite. Having gone through middle school and part of high school not knowing how to read, perhaps he is invisible. Nobody ever saw him.

I imagine he's in the bathroom, doing the same routine that has gotten him this far in life: when the issue of writing or literacy comes up, hide in the bathroom until the teacher forgets. Cut class. Just leave if the teacher brings it up, never come back. I tell Mike I'll be back. I gotta use the bathroom.

Pencil Eater is just outside the classroom, on a bench. His back is soaking wet, breathing hard. "Do the people here know what's up with you?" I ask. "With what?" he says, nibbling on a hangnail. He spits it out. "Nah, not really." "Your mom know?" I say. "Yeah," he says. "She tries to help me read, but," and Pencil Eater takes out the chewed pencil from his pocket and starts banging it against his knee, "she just gets mad." "So what did they tell you, the teachers?" I ask. Pencil Eater stops shaking his foot, looks up and with an earnest smile, "They said I was doing good." (Jesús Quintero, excerpts from field notes, May 2005)

Many young people at Youth Radio arrive ready to write—about themselves, their families, their communities, and the issues that affect their lives. However, many others struggle with writing; even more feel lost in the system. Every young person who walks through the door, or ends up in an outreach program like the one at this juvenile detention camp, carries a relationship to a public school system in which vast numbers of students fall through the cracks. Afterschool programs like Youth Radio create a space for young people to tell stories from outside the pathways of school-based education. Through these perspectives, Youth Radio students explore some of most pressing social and political issues of our time, including immigration, education, youth violence, and public health.

Democratic principles, and the tensions that invariably surround them, inform both the learning environments of youth media programs and the content of student stories.

### Beyond Youth Voice

The editorial process, in particular, reveals the complexities and tensions built into an environment where young people produce and share original work. At Youth Radio, adults do not merely hand young people recording equipment and send them off to "find their true voice" (for relevant critiques, see Fleetwood, 2005; Tannock, 2004; Trend, 1997). Rather, young people and adults continually negotiate thorny questions about how to shape material so as to maximize impact and audience reach without compromising young people's visions for their stories.

Youth Radio is both a youth development agency and a professional production company. In many cases, that dual mission provides clear guidelines for

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producing narratives that support young people's learning and well-being while informing a public through provocative broadcasts. There are times, though, when these two organizational "identities" raise tensions. In these situations, Youth Radio has a strong policy that youth development principles override broadcast pressures. Young people have the final editorial say over the content and distribution of their work.

Negotiating that policy on a day-to-day basis, however, is not always easy. Recently, we worked with a young soldier who had just returned from serving in Iraq. He kept a journal throughout his months on the front lines, which we together edited into a five-minute radio piece. Embedded in his writing were criticisms of day-to-day military practices on the ground, together with troubling descriptions of interactions with Iraqi citizens. It was provocative material; this young man was a vivid writer whose stories seemed an important antidote to sanitized war coverage. Our challenge was to figure out this young soldier's relationship to Youth Radio's youth development mission. Had we been a "regular" newsroom, we might not have given much thought to the potential consequences and even dangers this young man could face for sharing his story. He had not gone through the

Youth Radio program as a student, yet he was a young person sharing a story through Youth Radio. Broadcasting the story without naming the soldier was not an option because the outlet prohibited use of unnamed sources in cases like this. Early in the process, we reviewed with the young enlistee the probable risks in what he was doing—“outing” himself as a soldier who was also a witness and storyteller. Initiating this conversation about risk jeopardized the story, in a way. He could have decided to pull out—but he did not. In the end, however, an officer in his division killed the story on receiving word of the soldier’s intent to broadcast his diary. This editorial process raised issues that go far beyond word-choice and story structure; at stake were fundamental rights surrounding freedom of expression and the role of the press, as well as government and military policy. Despite no longer having access to the young man’s journal, Youth Radio set out to explore the limits—both external and self-imposed—placed on young soldiers’ free speech and to examine the impact of those limits on public information about the war.

Related issues arose through the editorial process in a different story that was part of Youth Radio’s war coverage. In the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal, Youth Radio visited some young Marines who had returned to college in California after taking part in the U.S. invasion. While we were recording, one of them opened a website he had created, in which he had added captions to digital photographs he had taken in Iraq. He called one snapshot of a burned Iraqi man “Mr. Crispy.” Another photo showed Americans in camouflage giving candy to Iraqi children with the caption, “Hey kids, here’s some candy. Now make sure you don’t sneak up on me tonight or I’ll have to shoot you.” The other young Marine began talking on tape about a corporal who had invited him to abuse an Iraqi prisoner. We included these moments, but not the name of the officer, in the story. Here was another instance of tension between investigative journalism and youth development. Youth media producers typically take some responsibility for the impact of any story on all young people involved in it, whether as subject, character, reporter, or commentator. However, Youth Radio is deeply committed to offering a counter-

narrative to the tightly controlled messages put forth in the mainstream press, and messages about the war are no exception. When the content of the story raises questions *about* democracy, the process of creating the story seems to challenge easy formulas that romanticize the idea of “youth voice” as always and automatically a site of freedom.

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These last two examples are not the kinds of incidents that occur every day in afterschool programs. Challenges like these are, to a certain extent, specific to a youth development program aiming to broadcast high-impact stories on volatile topics in difficult times. Yet every community-based organization in which young people experience and examine issues fundamental to a democratic society faces its own

challenges when it comes to reconciling youth development goals with social justice work. In the case of Youth Radio, journalistic integrity and rigor built into our mission are added to this mix.

## **Features and Tensions of Democratic Practice**

Looking across ethnographic moments such as the ones I have presented here, against the backdrop of comparative analysis I have conducted within ten additional youth media production sites across the U.S., several key features of such learning environments emerge. These features may hold particular relevance for programs in which young people produce original work for large audiences. However, they can be applied as a lens to community-based learning in a larger sense, across sites where youth and adults work both to embody and to question the idea of education as democracy in action.

### **Collegial Pedagogy**

The learning environment at Youth Radio is guided by a process of *collegial pedagogy*, in which young people and adults jointly frame and carry out projects in a relationship of interdependence and mutual accountability (Soep & Chavez, forthcoming). In collegial pedagogy, young people offer a key substantive contribution; they possess something the adults don’t have—a certain kind of access, understanding, experience, or analysis directly relevant to the project at



hand. The adults could not carry out the task themselves, even if they wanted to. In a sense, that is the whole point of youth media—to contribute insights and challenging perspectives to a mainstream media that too often ignores the experience and intelligence of youth. Such insights and perspectives were particularly instrumental in the case of the story described above, produced in the wake of the prison abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib. The reporter who interviewed the Marines about their experiences in Iraq and about the digital photographs they brought home was roughly

the same age as the young men. All of them shared popular culture references, styles of speech, and other generational markers that set a tone quite different from a typical interview between an adult reporter and young respondents, particularly when the reporter was asking questions about such sensitive topics. That said, the Youth Radio reporter came to this challenging task having trained with a series of adult professional journalists and media artists, and I, as a producer, accompanied her for tape gathering. In collegial pedagogy, mentoring adults provide access to equipment, expertise, in-the-moment advice, and crucially, a network of relationships with outlets for young people's work. Progressive educators often speak of young people and adults co-producing a learning environment, but in the collegial pedagogy of Youth Radio, that co-production goes beyond metaphor: Youth and adults literally co-create an original product released to a real audience.

### **Peer Teaching**

In every program at Youth Radio, experienced young people, often high school students themselves, teach newcomers to the organization. When new students arrive on a Wednesday for their first introductory class, a corps of peer teachers greets them and introduces them to the basic elements of a live radio show, as well as the ground rules at Youth Radio. By Friday, peer teachers and new students go on the air together to broadcast their show, *Youth in Control*, on KPFB-FM, as they do weekly for the next three months. Young people at Youth Radio routinely report that a highlight of their experience, and something that draws their continued commitment, is the fact that they learn from other young people. We replicate this structure of peer teaching at Youth Radio's outreach sites, including those serving youth in group homes and detention facilities, such as the one where Pencil Eater sat down to write his first radio commentary. A goal for those programs is for graduates, when they are released from incarceration, to enroll in one of the organization's various on-site programs.

Peer teaching is consistently one of the most popular internships at Youth Radio, a position for which young people apply once they've completed introductory and advanced class sessions. Very quickly, peer teachers begin linking their own accomplishments to those of their students, who, in some cases, may be the same age as their peer teachers, if not older. When one of their students overcomes nervousness "on the mic" or gets a story on the air, peer teachers will boast, "That's



my student!” The structure of peer teaching promotes a sense of responsibility for contributing to the learning environment of Youth Radio not only as receptive learners, but also as engaged citizens who facilitate other young people’s development. To become a peer teacher, interns must invest in additional professional development for themselves. In special intensive workshops and faculty meetings, peer teachers discuss lesson plan development, pedagogy, and classroom management. Their students see that they, too, can move into peer teaching roles, if they stay involved and build up their skills as producers and community-based educators.

### Multiple Outlets

*Youth in Control*, which young people broadcast beginning their first week at Youth Radio, has a real audience. But that audience is quite small, and the show is therefore a relatively protected outlet for young people who are new to the microphone. As young people accumulate experience, they have opportunities to produce stories for expanding outlets, ranging from commercial stations to highly trafficked websites to major shows like *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered* on National Public Radio, with audiences estimated at well over 20 million listeners. Clearly, the stakes and production values of broadcasts on these shows are high. Moreover, some of these national outlets have a certain sensibility and sound; not every story is a viable candidate for their programs. Critical, then, to the capacity for Youth Radio students to express a full range of perspectives and aesthetics, and to reach audiences of peers as well as adults, is the array of outlets they can target as they develop their stories. These outlets include local and national commercial and public radio stations, Youth Radio’s own website, [www.youthradio.org](http://www.youthradio.org), as well as webcasts and podcasts. The importance of multiple outlets has been particularly important in our war coverage. Our experience with the young soldier whose journal was blocked from broadcast by his military chain of command highlighted the value of outlets that do not require subjects in his position to reveal their full names. The breadth of outlets in Youth Radio’s repertoire has allowed us to produce stories such as one based on a series of emails between an active-duty

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soldier and his sister. As the soldier stipulated, the story kept his identity off the air. This feature of multiple outlets may seem specific to youth media programs. However, this notion of linking young people to varied sectors of “the public sphere,” providing them with the skills to understand and make decisions about how to reach those audiences, holds relevance to community-based youth education programs across the board (Kelley, 1997).

### Applied Agency

In her influential study of culturally relevant teaching, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1997) calls for literacy education that legitimates young people’s lived experiences and engages young people in collective, intergenerational work toward social justice. Youth Radio shares this approach, which foregrounds youth agency without underestimating the power and persistence of inequalities surrounding young people’s position in both youth communities and the wider society (Hull & Katz, 2002). This focus on supporting youth agency entails going beyond the goal of getting a young person’s story on the air—no matter how important that one piece might be, regardless of what honors and awards that broadcast might bring. Sites like Youth Radio can make a lasting and meaningful impact on individual young people and their communities only when programs support young people’s educational and professional opportunities, their

sense of social responsibility, and their participation in efforts to unsettle ideologies and institutions that reproduce the uneven distribution of power. When students go through an experience that upsets, angers, or even enrages them, we aim to provide the tools to translate that reaction into a mediated intervention that makes an actual difference for themselves and others. Recently, several Youth Radio interns were harassed by the local police, in one case while en route to an all-day organizational retreat, and in another case while escorting students in the introductory class up to the studio to go on the air for the *Youth in Control* show. Such experiences, all too familiar especially for young males of color, undermine youth agency in a very real sense. And yet through Youth Radio, the interns were able to draw on the details of their own encounters with law enforcement in a number of highly productive and provocative ways: through

spirited in-house meetings for students and staff; through a public forum bringing together community members, teens, and the local chief of police with members of his own staff; and through a series of highly challenging commentaries and reports for various outlets (with one currently being pitched to a national public radio show). Supporting youth agency, then, does not mean merely “giving youth voice.” Rather, it means working on a systemic level to help open concrete opportunities and expose injustices where they exist.

## Democracy in Action

This constellation of features creates conditions for a dynamic and complex learning environment for young people and adults.

A context marked by **collegial pedagogy** locates young people within a larger field of practice, in which they have meaningful relationships with adults in various positions of expertise, authority, and lived experience. This context provides resources for young people to consider their immediate decisions against the backdrop of the history of knowledge accumulated in a given field.

Despite the important role of adults, key to youth programs that embrace democratic practices are structures for **peer education**. Through peer education, young people develop opportunities to form critical judgments based on what they have learned from having to teach.

The opportunity to target and reach varied audiences through **multiple outlets** provides flexibility when it comes to decisions about how to present young people’s work. While these decisions may be formed collaboratively, and adults may urge young people to make compromises in order to reach the biggest audience, in the end, the final editorial judgment must reside with the youth.

**Applied agency** is a key feature of democratic practice in community-based education. The word *applied* invokes an abstract principle realized through concrete action. For “positive youth development” to mean more than a superficial opportunity for a young person to enjoy a fleeting moment of recognition, programs are well advised to engage their youth in broader efforts to unsettle social structures and histories that reinforce inequalities and distorted tellings of important truths.

To return to the story of Pencil Eater and his learned instinct to run away when called on to write, it is the role, and really the obligation, of community-based educators to follow such young folks out of the

room, to ask questions, to listen, and to create opportunities that make escape less attractive than engagement.

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