



# “Key Moments” as Pedagogical Windows into the Video Production Process

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## Abstract

*In this article, we trace learning across the digital video production process through case studies with four youth media arts organizations (YMAOs) across the United States. We hypothesize that what these organizations share is a series of key moments throughout the production process in which youth must articulate the relationship between the idea they intend to represent in their video and the tools of the digital video medium that afford representation. By highlighting these key moments, we can both describe the core features of the YMAO organizational process and offer a mechanism for tracing participant learning over time. We conclude with implications for teachers and leaders who may be interested in how to support the inclusion of digital production processes into formal instructional spaces. (Keywords: digital media production, assessment, out-of-school learning)*

## Introduction

In recent years, media educators and scholars have begun to focus on youth as members of participatory cultures (Jenkins et al., 2007) who engage in both the consumption and the production of digital media. Moreover, educators and scholars now believe that “literacy” is not simply a print-based, consumptive practice, but rather a set of multimodal, productive practices. Many youth are digital natives (Prensky, 2001) and are well on their way to becoming fluent in the “new literacies” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) that require the comprehension and creation of multimodal artifacts such as wikis, videogames, mashups, and movies. Whereas youth are already engaged in this work in their lives outside of school (Ito, 2008), researchers, teachers, and school leaders have just begun to think systematically about how to reframe teaching and learning to accommodate a frame for literacy that is both multimodal and productive.

The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills offers a framework for understanding “the skills, knowledge, and expertise students should master to succeed in work and life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (<http://www.21stcenturyskills.org>). This framework rests on the assumption that successful learners will produce creative content using current information and media technologies in an effort to address current local and global problems. Silva (2008) notes that out-of-school programs are already well-situated learning spaces to work with youth on the development of these skills. We can likely learn a lot about how environments can be structured to address 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills by understanding how out-of-school settings work with youth.

In this article, we focus on youth media arts organizations (YMAOs) as a subset of out-of-school programs where youth learn 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills. In particular, we are interested in how we can trace learning across the digital video production process. Through case studies with four YMAOs across the United States, we hypothesize that what these organizations share is a series of key moments throughout the production process in

which youth must articulate the relationship between the idea they intend to represent in their video and the tools of the digital video medium that afford representation. By highlighting these key moments, we can both describe the core features of the YMAO organizational process and offer a mechanism for tracing participant learning over time. We conclude with implications for teachers and leaders who may be interested in how to support the inclusion of digital production processes into formal instructional spaces.

## Tracing Learning in Youth Media Arts Organizations

YMAOs are designed spaces where youth participate in digital production processes. A growing body of research documents how these organizations work with youth to produce digital media. The National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture (NAMAC) youth media archive database describes 59 YMAOs around the United States, including their size, their sources of funding, and a breakdown of how they spend their time (<http://www.namac-yimi-survey.org/index.cfm>). Although the database provides basic structural and organizational information on these YMAOs, it lacks specific information about the work youth do, how they learn to do it, and what their products represent. Our understanding of how youth engage in digital production processes is derived from research on individual organizations and independently run programs that represent a variety of media, including film (Bing-Canar & Zerkel, 1998; Fleetwood, 2005; Halverson, Lowenhaupt, Gibbons, & Bass, in press; Mayer, 2000; Vargas, 2006), digital story (Hull & Katz, 2006; Nelson, Hull, & Roche-Smith, 2008), spoken-word digital poetry (Jocson, 2005), and radio (Soep, 2006). These studies analyze YMAOs from three perspectives: (a) participant observation studies where program designers report on the work they did with a group of youth, how the process went, and the products that resulted (e.g., Fleetwood, 2005; Mayer, 2000); (b) multimodal analyses of the digital media products (e.g., Hull & Nelson, 2005; Halverson, in press); and (c) processes of digital art-making (e.g., Nelson et al., 2008; Soep, 2006).

The third category of studies best addresses how youth learn to engage in complex digital literacy practices by understanding process as a means to document, describe, and represent learning. Elisabeth Soep (2006) traces learning in YMAOs by identifying moments in production processes where youth engage in critiquing others’ works in progress, thereby demonstrating that youth understand how to use the language of art critique and production to negotiate the construction of an authentic product. Though Soep has identified the conditions under which critique among youth is promoted, the appearance of critiques as “episodes of learning” is neither predictable nor regulated and, therefore, not a part of a designed, curricular process.

**Table 1: Four Case-Study Organizations**

	Location	Production Cycle Length	Type of Program	Time of Data Collection	Number of Youth Participants
Appalachian Media Institute (AMI)	Whitesburg, KY	3 months	Summer internship	Summer 2008	12
In Progress	St. Paul, MN (Headquarters)	Varied	Ongoing	Summer 2007	10
Reel Works Teen Filmmaking	New York, NY	6 months	Semester	Fall 2007–Spring 2008	12
Street Level Youth Media	Chicago, IL	3 months	Summer internship	Summer 2008	12

Researchers in the DUSTY project, an after-school program focused on the creation of digital stories (Hull & Katz, 2006), use the evolution of the product itself to document process (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Nelson et al., 2008). Drawing from individual participants' "folders of work," including dictated scripts and revisions, storyboards, and reflections on others' work, they aim to "document how [a] digital movie became an artifact with something akin to its own agency" (Nelson et al., 2008, p. 422). They also turn to ethnographic descriptions of work sessions to understand how authorial decisions are made over time and how those decisions affect the final products. Unlike Soep's analysis, which focuses on one type of interaction across a long production cycle, Nelson et al. capture the entire process using a variety of data types and methods. Both of these analyses, however, focus on the idiosyncrasies of individual participants' experiences rather than on the organizational experience as a whole.

## Method: Researching the Digital Video Production Process

To document learning in digital video production, we find that it is not sufficient to describe the work of the organization or to analyze the final products; rather, we need to attend to the work youth do in situ as they build digital media over time. Following the work of Soep (2006), the DUSTY project (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Nelson et al., 2008), and our previous work documenting the process of producing plays from youths' life stories (Halverson, 2007, 2008), we asked the following research questions:

1. What is the pedagogical process through which youth learn to explore and represent their identities through digital video production at YMAOs?
2. What are the features of this process across youth media arts organizations?

In asking these questions, we assume that (a) there is a structure to the process taught by YMAOs, and (b) studying the way that youth are taught in situ would allow us to understand this structure.

To answer these questions, we conducted four instrumental case studies (Stake, 2000) with YMAOs across the United States: Appalachian Media Institute, In Progress, Reel Works Teen Filmmaking, and Street Level Youth Media (see Table 1). We chose these four organizations for their documented record of success in working with youth to produce digital media about the stories of their lives.<sup>1</sup>

At each organization, we traced one production cycle from participants' initial entry into the organization to the final presentation of their work. In identifying a production cycle as the frame for our cases, we created consistency in our data collection not by the amount of time we spent with each organization but by the organizational structure provided for participants to produce their digital art (Table 1). To capture the production cycle at every organization, we collected a variety of qualitative data:

- *Documentation of the process in action.* Most of this documentation was in the form of ethnographic observation (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), although we also obtained video documentation at various points across the production cycle.
- *Artifact collection.* We collected all artifacts youth created around the digital production process, including application essays, journals, group brainstorming sheets, worksheets, edited/unedited video footage, and blog entries. We also collected curricular materials used by organizational leaders and individual workshop facilitators.
- *Interviews with participants, organizational leaders, facilitators, and mentors.*

Data collection and data analysis were iterative; we employed a constant comparative method across our case studies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We began with two open-ended case studies (Reel Works and In Progress) and then returned to the field a year later to conduct two more directed case studies (AMI and Street Level) based on our initial interpretations. In our open-ended case studies, we began by interviewing the organizations' directors and reviewing organizational artifacts (Web presence, printed materials, films submitted on media sharing sites) to determine how the organization viewed their process. Bringing this general understanding to bear, we collected data across one production cycle at Reel Works and In Progress. For the purposes of this analysis, we were interested in the macro structure that defined the work of the production cycle within the organization. This was informed primarily through an open-ended coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) of observational data and artifacts created during the production cycle.<sup>2</sup> From this analysis emerged a series of five "key moments" that capture the pedagogical framework for the explicit display of identity (idea to be signified) and representation (filmic signifiers) that are described in the next section.

For our second round of case studies, we brought this basic framework to the data collection process: We looked for the appearance of these key moments, leaving open the possibility that certain moments could be absent and/or that different ones could be present. We asked organizational leaders more pointed questions about the relationship between identity and representation, and we focused our observations and artifact collection on opportunities for the explicit display of identity and representation.

It is important to point out that our goal as researchers was to study processes already in place to "document the ordinary" (Stake, 2000, p. 445) in each of these organizations. These various forms of data served to paint a full picture of how youth engaged in digital video production in the context of their organizations, illustrating how youth produced an autobiographical digital video from the perspective of the process as it happens rather than how it should happen. Although we can say much about individual organizations and about individual participant experiences within each organization, this article focuses on the com-

<sup>1</sup> For a full description of how and why we chose these organizations, see Halverson, Lowenhaupt, Gibbons, & Bass, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> We collected far more data in our study than we used to construct the pedagogical key moments described in this article. We intend, in future work, to focus on the micro-analytic moments that allow us to see how youth engage in identity exploration and representation within the context of this pedagogical frame.

**Table 2: Key Moments across Organizations**

Key Moments	Appalshop	In Progress	Reel Works	Street Level
Application	Written, competitive	Oral, open enrollment	Written and interview, competitive	Written, competitive
Pitch	Topic selection brainstorm and presentation with colleagues and staff	One-on-one consultations with director	Oral presentation to colleagues, staff, and professionals	Oral and visual presentation to colleagues and staff
Shooting Script	Shot list	Shot list, essay, narrative description	Story development worksheets	Journal entries, including story boards, shot lists, scripts
Editing	Group interactions		One-on-one interactions with mentor	One-on-one interactions with mentor
Public Presentation	Screening	Screening and/or gallery show	Screening	Gallery show

monalities across organizations in terms of how learning is structured and demonstrated. Given these goals, our findings may not seem novel to instructors and leaders who do this work with youth. Rather, we hope that there is a sense of verisimilitude (Bruner, 1986) in the way we describe the pedagogical process of representing identity through film. For those unfamiliar with the digital production process, we hope our analysis provides a useful inroad.

## Findings: Key Moments across Organizations

In constructing accounts of the video production process in our four YMAOs, we find that all four organizations share five moments in the production cycle (see Table 2). These are moments where participating youth must focus on the story they want to tell (in this case, autobiographical stories) and what the medium of film<sup>3</sup> affords them in terms of representing this story. These moments are essentially checkpoints in which youth make informal, formative assessments before continuing with the process. Throughout the production cycle, youth participate in technical lessons (from the development of general skills such as how to conduct an interview, to specific skills such as how to “rip” audio or video footage off the Internet or a DVD), professional development activities (such as exposure to the work of current professional artists in the field), and extensive story development activities. In future work, we will comprehensively describe these lessons and processes, including a discussion of the variation across organizations in the development of technical and narrative skills. In this analysis, rather than describing the entire production cycle, however, we focus on the key moments that are present across organizations and that require participants to reflect on their story and the filmic medium. Table 2 is a summary of these key moments across the four organizations.

### Application

Although it is often overlooked as part of the production cycle, the video production process actually begins with youth applying to the programs. All four programs asked youth to explain why they wanted to participate and what story they intended to tell through film. This is not a lesson that is taught by the organizations but a type of pre-lesson that often serves both as a way to determine who can participate and as a baseline for how well articulated participants stories are. At In Progress, though admission is open to any youth in the community, the director begins every production cycle with a one-on-one meeting with every interested participant in which they articulate their initial ideas and make a verbal agreement to see the process through. The other three organizations have competitive admissions criteria, so a well-conceived application is a necessary precondition for

beginning the production process. Youth are asked to respond on printed application forms and in one-on-one interviews to questions such as “Do you know what the story is that you want to tell with your film?” (Reel Works, October 2007). Whereas other lessons and assignments throughout the process gauge how much the youth know about filmmaking and the kinds of technical instruction they need, the application serves as a formative benchmark of how well elaborated an individual’s narrative is. Moreover, unlike in school settings where students are not often made to pledge to learn, the applications are a moment when youth explicitly express their need to tell a story and their willingness and dedication to future learning in the workshops.

### Pitch

The “pitch” is a name we adapted from the Reel Works process, though it is also common terminology in film, television, and advertising. In all the organizations, this lesson occurs about one fourth of the way through the process, after the youth have learned media critique and filming skills, such as interviewing and using the camera, but before the youth begin filming and editing. It is the time when all youth gain approval for their video with some community of people (ranging from internal pitches to meetings with television executives) before they begin writing, filming, and editing their pieces. The format varies widely across organizations, but youth never begin work on their pieces until they have pitched their idea. Unlike the applications, which focus on the story youth want to tell, the pitch contains both the content of the story and how film will serve as a medium for telling this story. For example, in a typical pitch at Reel Works, a youth presented her idea for her film, titled *Rupture*, which she described as “a story about how I reunited with my mom after being separated from her for 10 years.” Then she discussed how she would express this story in film, given what she had learned thus far through the production process:

And through observational style filming, I will ask my mom questions about why she left and, you know, why she wanted me here with her now.... And at times my thoughts and opinions will be heard in voiceovers. And the observational footage will be paired with voiceover.... And the style will be intimate, personal, such as shooting in their living rooms. (Reel Works, pitch meeting, March 2008)

It is during the pitch that youth demonstrate what they have learned so far about storytelling and what they plan to do in the next stages in the process. Often, the facilitators use this moment to assess how far along the youth are in their understanding and what more needs to be taught to them before or during the filming process.

<sup>3</sup> Lemke (2007) describes video and film as “shar[ing] substantially the same audio-visual semiotic; the same interpretative conventions for their salient sensory features” (p. 41). In our work, we use these terms interchangeably.

## Shooting Script

All four organizations created opportunities for youth to build representations of how they intended to make their films. The level of structure the organization provided varied from predesigned story development worksheets to more open-ended formats, such as the creation of a “shot list,” a “storyboard,” and/or a narrative script. This moment has clear artifacts, or representations of the youths’ ideas in written form (similar to brainstorming worksheets or essays in English classes). These representations combine narrative and structural elements of the film. For example, in the narrative script for *Rupture*, the filmmaker integrates the content of the film with modes of representation: “Next the film will show the three of us in a verité moment (possibly in a subway) talking casually about comparing our lives now to our lives back home.” She also ties the content of her film directly to the three-act structure for short-form documentaries promoted by Reel Works: “A link into the final act will be my friends discussing their views about motherhood/children and where they hope to live when they start their families.” (Reel Works, spring 2008 cohort)

Before youth begin filming, organizational leaders or mentors approve the shooting script (or equivalent representation). It is expected at this point in the process that youth can fully articulate the story they want to tell and can outline how the tools of the filmmaking process—including structural tools like the three-act structure and cinematographic tools such as “verité” style—afford them the opportunity to communicate their story in film. These shooting scripts create a bridge from the narrative as pitched to the narrative as filmed, and they serve as a plan of action that the facilitators can check to see how prepared the youths are for the next stage of filming.

## Editing

Once youth have collected footage—in the form of interviews, “b-roll,” staged footage, found footage, photographs, and sound clips—the arduous process of editing begins. Editing in filmmaking is similar to editing in other situations, such as editing a school paper, but in this case it is the mechanism by which youth actively determine how to shape the story they want to tell. This shaping involves the use of visual and auditory modes used both individually and in combination. Whereas the application, pitch, and shooting script are all characterized by the production of an artifact that represents where youth are in the process at that point, editing has no single artifact associated with it. Rather, editing as a key moment is characterized by the critique episodes Soep (2006) describes. Learning is demonstrated through dialogue about how a piece should evolve, either among a group of youth or between a youth and his or her mentor.

At Appalachian Media Institute, for example, youth work in small groups to create their videos, so mutual critique and exchange of ideas is common. After each round of filming, groups of three or four youth who are making a film together log footage and create clips, which are combinations of visual footage and audio, such as music or interview dialogue. Often, one youth logs footage while the other two plan for the next shot on the shot list, find music, etc. At the other organizations, the editing process is much more solitary, so episodes of critique often occur between individual youth and the facilitator, director, or professional mentor. The focus here is on how to use the tools of editing to construct a filmic representation of the narrative the youth built in earlier parts of the process. Much like writing a paper, this moment is when the youth bring their ideas and their material artifacts to create their story in film and where they are applying all that they have learned this far in the process.

## Public Presentation

A key feature of any artistic process is the public sharing of final work. Unlike in school, where students complete and display work primarily for

teachers, youth in these organizations almost always display their work publicly. Research on youth arts organizations has demonstrated the importance of the public performance for youth participation, motivation, learning, and development (Halverson, 2005; Heath; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994), and these YMAOs are no exception. The format for public sharing included standing gallery installations (Street Level); internal, community screenings (In Progress); and public screenings (AMI and Reel Works).<sup>4</sup> AMI, In Progress, and Reel Works youth and staff also work toward bringing their films to a broader audience through submissions in film festivals across the country and through online forums, such as Listen Up!, YouTube, and Facebook. In many of these forums, youth are given the opportunity to publicly reflect on the meaning of their work through artist statements (Street Level) and post-screening talk-backs (AMI and Reel Works). This moment of demonstrating identity and representation looks most similar to a performance assessment, where learning is measured through the successful completion of an authentic project (OERI, 1993) involving multimodal communication (Kalantzis, Cope, & Harvey, 2003).

## Discussion and Implications

In our work with YMAOs, we sought to determine the pedagogical structures that facilitate the representation of identities through film and whether and how those representations change over time. We were interested in documenting more than the development of specific, technical skills, as measuring the acquisition of technical skills, such as the use of a digital camera or of Final Cut Pro software, is fairly straightforward. Youth develop these technical skills nested within multimodal digital literacy practices that require the generation of story ideas followed by the representation of those ideas first as proposals (in the form of pitches and shooting scripts) and then as multimodal narratives (in the form of edits and final products). Additionally, participating youth develop a host of interpersonal skills as they negotiate relationships with their peers and with adults in and outside of the organization. And, although we know that participation in arts-based, out-of-school learning settings such as YMAOs promotes positive development (Heath, 2000; Smyth & Heath, 1999), until now little work has documented specifically how pedagogical practices shape learning in the context of the art-making process.

Furthermore, we find that we can trace the evolution of identity and representation in these spaces. Identifying the key moments in the process is the first step toward understanding how youth express their stories and receive feedback as they make their movies and toward recognizing how this structure facilitates learning. These five key moments—application, pitch, shooting script, editing, and performance—open up opportunities for us to recognize and analyze the spaces in teaching and learning by examining the artifacts that the youth produce at each stage. The shooting script, for example, represents how youth understand their narrative, the tools of film, and the relationship between these at that point in time. The conversations that happen around editing reveal the active representational choices that youth make toward communicating a narrative concept to a future audience. The final product represents the summative moment in the decision-making process that is digital video production. Every filmmaker, then, creates a trace of his or her film, over time, from its initial conception to the final product.

Tracing identity and representation in this way reveals much about how youth develop digital media literacy through their work in organizations. It is difficult to study how youth learn to engage in digital media production in school settings, as these projects are often designed with predetermined language arts and technology standards in mind. Student learning, then, is often measured in terms of these standards or in terms of how learning digital production can be applied to skills and habits of mind

<sup>4</sup> These were the presentational choices made during the production cycle we observed. However, the same YMAOs have used different presentation formats at different points in their life spans.

independent of the process. In their work tracing digital story production over time, Stornaiuolo, Hull, and Nelson (2009) discuss the importance of designing multiple measures over time to document process. Although the key moments framework has allowed us to understand how the youth filmmaking process works across these four organizations, as Stornaiuolo et al. suggest, key moments might also serve as formative and summative assessment tools for YMAOs to measure how participants are faring in the process and could potentially do the same for school-based digital production activities.

Just as it has been difficult to understand digital media learning in schools, it is also challenging to study how youth learn digital production outside of instructional settings. There is ample evidence to demonstrate that youth can successfully engage in digital media production on their own (Ito et al., 2008), and researchers have back-mapped this participation to the kinds of sophisticated literacy skills we want students to leave high school with (Gee, 2003; Jenkins et al., 2007). However, this work does little to illuminate how youth come to be successful in these endeavors. In our work, we see that youth are not engaged in a freeform set of activities, nor are they working in a highly scripted instructional environment. Rather, we see the key moments as formative checkpoints where youth must demonstrate an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the relationship between their story and film as a representational medium. Youth begin with a story and a willingness to learn expressed in the application, learn a set of video production skills, then present their knowledge in pitches before moving on to shooting scripts, and end with the presentation in multiple forms and for a variety of audiences. Each step is necessary for the next, and all are set within the context of a larger curriculum. Future analyses of our work will focus on understanding individual youth trajectories through these key moments in an effort to move from the study of pedagogy to the study of learning.

There are direct implications of this work for teaching media literacy production in schools. Rather than thinking about the design of school-based digital media as another curriculum, focusing on these five key moments allows teachers to formatively track students through the process. Teachers could structure teaching and learning around the achievement of these key moments, knowing that this will lead students toward the successful completion of a short film. The skills and habits of mind necessary for reaching these key moments are embedded within the key moments structure; a successful production process requires them. In schools, then, teaching media literacy production can have a recognizable structure, and teachers can assess student learning at regular intervals because each key moment has its own artifact that teachers can assess. This means that media literacy is not only teachable, it is assessable as well, as long as one knows the key moments in which youth will demonstrate learning.

Although it has not been a focus of this article, one of the theoretical drivers of our research work as a whole is to develop an understanding of how youth construct and represent personal identity through artistic production (Halverson, 2005, 2007, 2008). There is a powerful connection between the stories we tell about our lives and the identities we take on (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Keller-Cohen & Dyer, 1997; Mishler, 1999) across all forms of storytelling, including digital media production (Willett, Burn, & Buckingham, 2005). This makes our understanding of how youth engage successfully in art making even more important, which is why, in part, that the organizations presented in this article were purposefully selected for their emphasis on autobiographical art making in their mission and work. Looking forward, we intend to examine how identity is expressed through this structure. This may be particularly useful for youth who feel marginalized in traditional institutions and struggle to develop a positive identity in adolescence. Delving into the complexities of the youth expression within the different key moments as they happen through time

will allow us to trace how filmmaking affords identity exploration and expression, which will deepen our understanding of how media literacy is fostered in structured spaces.

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