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“There is Nothing Else to Do but Make Films:” Urban Youth Participation at a Film and Television School

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Abstract

Our three-year inquiry at the Gulf Islands Film and Television School (GIFTS), a community-based media arts educational center, presents a practical model illustrating how urban youth explore their own strengths and connect themselves to a learning space in a rural environment within the context of filmmaking. It also offers pedagogical insights for art education by envisioning possibilities for learning spaces that are relevant to both out-of and in-school arts programs. We first present an overview of GIFTS in conjunction with participants’ reflections, then provide discussion addressing implications for art teachers and art educators which explores the role of space in relation to the media arts practice for urban youth.

Introduction

In this article, we focus on how a rural learning environment has become a transformative space for urban youth engagement in media arts practice. Our three-year inquiry at the Gulf Islands Film and Television School (GIFTS), a community-based media arts educational center, presents a practical model illustrating how urban youth explore their own strengths and connect themselves to a learning space in a rural environment within the context of filmmaking.



Research indicates that situating community-based media arts programs outside of formal school settings provides diverse spaces for youth to introspectively respond to and reflect upon their experiences in relation to the complex world in which they reside (Cohen-Cruz, 2005; Goldfarb, 2002; Irwin & Kindler, 1999; Weber & Mitchell, 2008). Such community-based initiatives strive to foster shared commitment of creative, social, and moral capacities of individuals and communities (Buckingham, 2007; Darts, 2007; Peppler, 2010) and attempt to facilitate learners' artistic representations of knowing across time and space as manifested through their pedagogical engagement in media art forms and digital tools (Burn, 2009; Castro & Grauer, 2010; Eger, 2010). Evidence indicates that such digitally-mediated arts teaching and learning experiences occurring in the community are effective mechanisms to build individual skill sets, promote community engagement and provide broader social benefits (Darts, 2006; Goldman, Booker, & McDermott, 2008; Heath, 2001). While many of these community based programs are situated within urban neighborhoods serving youth (e.g., Goodman, 2003; Levy, 2008; Poyntz, 2009), alternatives, such as the one that is the focus of this article, are located in rural areas where urban learners are brought into the setting that is unique to them to foster alternate learning experiences. At GIFTS, an emphasis on creativity, critical analysis, identity development and voice are achieved through an intense immersion into film production. Although participation in GIFTS requires traveling from the comfort of home and peers, we have observed its popularity with urban youth; some of whom repeatedly participate in various programs and become highly involved at GIFTS.

Through this study, we have come to understand that programs like GIFTS offer a distinct place of arts learning in the larger learning and media ecologies that youth and young adults navigate. This is not to suggest that community-based arts programs are somehow superior to in-school arts programs; rather they form an important part of the learning ecology in learner's lives outside of school boundaries. The value of such community-based art programs is that they provide an occasion to create encounters for learners to experience differing ways



of knowing. This model also indicates a learning opportunity through the collaborative process of filmmaking where participants are able to explore themselves in relation to their interactions with peers and surroundings. We first present an overview of GIFTS in conjunction with participants' reflections, then provide discussion addressing implications for art teachers and art educators which explores the role of space in relation to the media arts practice for urban youth.

The Gulf Islands Film and Television School (GIFTS)

Founded 15 years ago by documentary and commercial filmmakers on the site of a former logging camp, GIFTS is a community-based media arts educational center on the island of Galiano in British Columbia, Canada. The island is situated across Georgia Strait from Vancouver and isolated by geography. Galiano Island is one of a series of small islands that are strung across the American/Canadian border in the Salish Sea and make up the San Juan Islands to the south and the Gulf Islands in Canada. It is a 45-minute ferry ride across from Vancouver on a ferry that operates twice a day in good weather. The island itself is 26 kilometers long with a population of less than 1000 permanent residence. Most of the cottages on Galiano are owned by weekenders who want a get-away from the accelerated pace of urban life and a return to an idyllic natural setting. Two small clusters of stores at the south end of the island provide basic services but there is limited cell phone and Internet coverage for most of the island.



Promoted as a “film boot camp,” GIFTS offers intensive, residential programs to youth and adults lasting a weekend to one or two-weeks. Participants are invited to work in small groups with professional filmmakers - addressed as mentors - to produce short films featuring such genres as drama, documentary, and animation. They are immersed in an environment of cooperative, collaborative, and creative practice, mirroring experiences of the professional film industry. The basic film making equipment and editing programs are seen as professional tools and treated with respect; participants are treated as filmmakers and taught to use professional language, tools and techniques. Simultaneously, they are separated from their normal daily routines and social contacts, residing communally on the island, with the shared goal of creating a film within a given time. As Mentor Alex commented, “The island is a big one. You’re here; there’s nowhere to go; there’s nothing else to do but make films – there’s no distractions here.”



GIFTS draws youth learners aged 14-20 from urban areas across the Pacific Northwest and beyond. Students participate due to their own interest in digital media or adult recommendations from acting agencies, teachers, parents or First Nations Bands.¹ Participants

¹ In Canada, many First Nations Bands provide education funding to members of their communities. Both urban and rural Bands send participants to GIFTS in programs specific to their own interests and/or to regular programs.

attend and pay full fees, receive scholarships, participate as unpaid interns, or are funded by special interest groups and agencies.



Prior to taking GIFTS' one-week Media Intensive Program, the students know that arrival is Sunday evening and they are expected to publicly screen finished film productions by the following Saturday afternoon. Leaving the comfort of their previous lives, clutching their pillows, clothes and possessions, students have described the Sunday ferry ride like a Harry Potter trip to Hogwarts. On the trip across the Straight of Georgia—usually in the dark—they know no one on board and are headed

into the middle of nowhere. Picked up by a rickety school van at the ferry terminal, students are taken through the rainforest where they experience darkness and silence in a closed space with other equally uncertain participants.





Awakening in an unfamiliar dorm bed, on Monday the students finally are able to see where they are situated. Within a lush second growth rainforest, GIFTS' campus features a large courtyard surrounded by student dorm rooms, a kitchen, and classrooms. The common courtyard area serves multiple purposes including dining, socializing, and working. The founder of GIFTS, George, orients the group and introduces the mentors while trying to make

students more at ease in this new space. In the beginning of each program, a mantra of respect is evident in George's orientation, "Respect yourself. Respect everyone else, including the mentors, and the staff and the kitchen people, and everybody. And respect the equipment." For the remainder of the week, students work with mentors with differing expertise - acting, directing, documentary, drama, and animation. The curricular premise of GIFTS is simply to conceptualize, script, act, shoot, edit and produce a short film in a week. There is no fixed block scheduling at GIFTS except the mealtimes, yet the compressed timeline makes students devote their days and nights to get ready for the public screening at the end of each workshop, as one young student observed, "... you're on a timeline; you have to get it done."





Learning through Collaboration

In addition to the pressure of a production deadline, students are asked to work collaboratively with peers they just met. Initially, they have expressed mixed feelings about such requirements and then recognized each other's strengths through their collective endeavors. Jeremy claimed, "Part of the whole thing of GIFTS is you learn to work with people...I think respect is important; people have to learn not to argue with each other;" while Stephanie described, "It's not easy to work with people you don't really know. It's more about helping each other learn." Anna observed the collective effort with her teammates was about "pulling it all together from just the three of us." Both Anna and Jeremy commented that the practice of living together in a dorm environment caused them to know their teammates' interests and strengths, not only from their experience of making films, but also from their daily interactions. As Jeremy explained, "We see each other days and nights; you get to know someone really well, not only their films and personality."



Allison, a mentor, observed the transition of this cooperative and collaborative experience and considered, “It’s a very uplifting moment when [students] finally work together.” She described,

Making a film together can be a hard adjustment for someone, I suppose, at that young age, if you’re shy or awkward, and you’ve never had to take leadership over other people or direct people. So when you get that role suddenly thrown at your feet, where you have all these people in front of you and you need to organize and lead them through a movie. You have to step up to the plate suddenly, and it’s a big adjustment. But [students] sort of need to have that experience and call those shots, and by the end of it, they get used to it...I think by alternating those roles, they learn a deep respect for each other and understand the roles and how to respect those roles on set. And their friendships grow really strong with that experience too.

Commenting on this learning style, Alex, another mentor, noticed, “It’s not so much about the film. It’s about learning the process of the making of film.” He further explained,

Like right now, a group of kids have got a documentary about love, and they might have three different ideas of love. So when they go to start editing, they’re going to have a major, major argument about what to actually put in the film. Because they’ve got all these people who said all these different things and they might or might not agree with them. You know, they’ve got to compromise. They might have to take something out or put something in that they don’t like.

Learning through Decision Making

While engaging in learning activities and relationships, students also attempt to seek out resources for their films in an unfamiliar isolated island. Mentors are there to offer local insights, suggesting potential interviewees or shooting locations, but students are “on their own,” according to a student, Jenny. She described, “Our group had to talk to people on the island to let us interview them, and we had to interview them again because we forgot some questions. It’s kind of awkward, but we figured it out and got better.” Residents on the island are familiar with the presence of GIFTS students who are regularly visible – acting in the woods, shooting at the beach, or perhaps interviewing a local artist. The students may appear amateur, asking an artist to repeat a sentence that they forget to record or feeling shy acting in public, yet they are engaged and becoming more comfortable with the unfamiliar surroundings. Jenny joked, “I can’t believe I survived without my cell phone for a week;” Jonathan claimed, “From now I am going to think of work instead of a vacation when I’m at the beach.”



Although mentors are present at film sites, students are supported in a context where they make decisions, take responsibility, and have control throughout the production process. As a result, students feel their ideas are valued and respected. Anna observed that a mentor “had his ideas and he didn’t force them on us.” Some students expressed a sense of ownership, of being capable of navigating media and learning: “At GIFTS, they don’t tell you what to think, they teach you how to think.” Anna remarked on the freedom of being able to “...do whatever you want as far as your creation goes.” Some also mentioned how such experiences differ from learning at their home school that was more controlled and did not focus on developing independent learners. Tyler described his learning experience at GIFTS as, “This is so cool; it’s better than school. It’s actually fun,” while Jonathan commented, “It’s different. It’s hard to believe this is a film ‘school.’ We are supposed to be working on sheets or writing down stuff and working at desks if this is a ‘school,’ but [GIFTS] is more free.”



Mentors at GIFTS

Avoiding titles such as teacher or trainer that may indicate power and authority in a learning context, a mentor's role at GIFTS is much closer to that of mediator and facilitator. Mentors would say to students, "Do it and learn by the experience of making something;" "Don't worry if you make a mistake, that's part of the process;" or "What if you tried it this way, and if you don't like it, put it back to how you had it?" We observed the mentor's role as managing producer in the film and television industry, one who resourcefully oversees the execution of production. Warren claimed, "My job is to help students work together to commit to their own ideas in a collective;" Allison remarked, "I just need to be there to sort of facilitate so that [students] know what's possible and what's available for them to use, to their advantage of making their films."

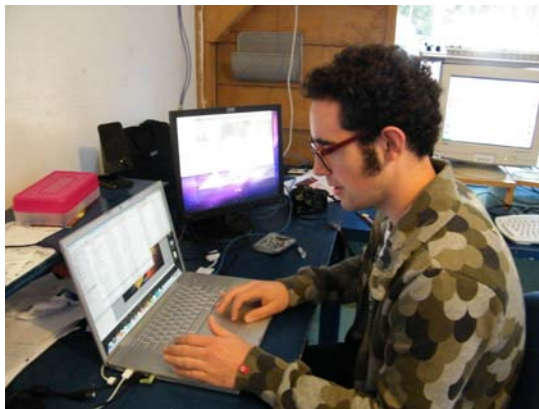
Many mentors working at GIFTS are alumni who took a course at GIFTS as preteens or teens and returned as interns and mentors while studying in colleges or working in the film industry. Allison, a mentor who had not been a student at GIFTS, finds this return phenomenon "amazing." She observed, "There's a lot of mentors and interns who have been students of GIFTS, and there's a sort of progression of coming here as a student and becoming an intern and then eventually mentoring and that sort of evolution." Nick and Dan, both GIFTS students and now mentors, feel it is hard to describe why they returned. Nick, a freelance animator introduced to the world of animation at GIFTS when he was 16, said, "I just keep coming back every year." Dan, an English and Film major at McGill University remarked, "I love Montreal as a big city, but I also really enjoy the simple, solitary learning experience [at GIFTS]. I love coming back." Jeremy, currently an intern and former student who wants to become a mentor, explained his reason for returning to GIFTS:

The whole experience was a lot better than just the end movie, right? It's not about: Oh my God, the movie I made was really good. It's about: In that week, what did I do? I wrote a script; I made five friends; I learned how to use a camera;

I learned how to edit on a computer. And another thing about why people keep coming back is because you come here for one week and time just goes out the window. For example, I already feel like I've been here a week, but I've been here just two days. Time is just like...Time is longer. I feel like I'm doing more stuff here.

Liam, a veteran mentor also commented on this phenomenon:

The reason why these kids come back is because they have a good time here...There are no grades [at GIFTS]. Some kids care about the product, but some are more interested in socializing and that experience. It's not mandatory, so we have to remember that it's the fun and enjoyment that keep them coming back and make them remember it.



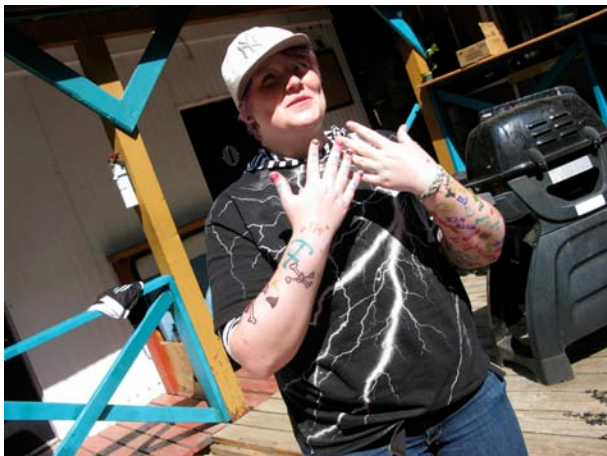
Implications for Art Education for Urban Youth

The description of GIFTS in conjunction with reflection from participants illustrates how an informal learning space outside of formal schooling provides young people from an urban context a new kind of learning community that brings together elements of cooperation, collaboration, empowerment, social engagement, identity, and media arts practice. Situating GIFTS' locale in a non-urban setting leads us to discuss how its unique structure and program can offer a model for creating an authentic, engaging learning environment for arts education practice. We consider the pedagogical model of GIFTS as more than just a get-away or therapeutic experience for urban youth in a natural environment. Instead, placing urban youth in an unfamiliar environment where they have to develop their ownership and initiative beyond their comfort zone leads to what many described as “a transformative experience.”



Envisioning the Potential of Space

We believe that engaging learning places are critical for developing social practice. Evans and Boyte (1986) connect the notion of free spaces to discussions about community, public life, and civil society, defining it as “settings between private lives and large-scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence, and vision” (p. 17). Our research sheds light on GIFTS’ capacity for being a free space and supports Evans and Boyte’s theoretical insight that a free space is where “people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue” (p. 17). We observed how participants at GIFTS experienced learning as cohesive, and at times, discordant groups, working through challenges and tensions that the pressures of time and resources created in ways that simulated the reality of the film industry. This constraint of filmmaking resulted in bringing creative tension, cooperation, collaboration and stress to the forefront throughout production processes, yet it also created conditions for taking risks developing trust and communicating ideas of personal and collective significance. Lessons from GIFTS demonstrate that an enabling learning environment depends upon its ability to inspire mutual and empowering learning relationships among mentors and learners.



We suggest that successful arts and technology integration programs should not be fully dependent on state of the art technology, but focus instead on learning activities are structured by student engagement and mentorship. GIFTS, as a free space, represents a learning environment that develops cooperative and collaborative peer learning so that participatory engagement fosters a sense of belonging and accomplishment.

Seeing Learners both as Agents of Change Personally and Professionally

The structure and location of GIFTS help to promote digital media as a pedagogical means for youth to become aware of their strengths, construct new identities, and develop their potential. Unlike territorially-bound communities where people know each other, learners at GIFTS, during the process of making films, come to know each other through collective interests and quickly build new relationships and identities. These new identities may differ from who they are outside the island and become shaped by an autonomous, self-directed GIFTS learning experiences. We observed that such experiences encourage urban youth to see themselves as agents of change in their own communities and to develop a greater degree of self-agency in the pursuit of professional goals. Agency is defined as a freedom to act from an understanding that youth are depended upon and can have an effect not only on their peers, but on the working environment, the mentors and the final product. It is a sense that what they do matters, not only to themselves but to each other. For example, a First Nations young man took his GIFTS experience back to his community, where he has served as a youth leader to teach other youth filmmaking. An Aboriginal student who was not successful in a typical school environment achieved success in GIFTS' programs and returned a number of times. In addition, many alumni return as interns and mentors, forming an interest-driven network in which they share common experiences and give back to GIFTS as a community of educators.



Participants at GIFTS expressed positive comments on mentors' openness to their ideas and working styles and on the realizations that the constraint of time created a place where they had a sense of ownership and control over their creative productions. We observed that media arts practice at GIFTS encourages youth to recognize the correlation between learners and settings and to develop a sense of agency through their learning experiences.

Final Thoughts

In a discussion about values of lifelong learning, Heath (2001) suggests the need for attention to examine community organizations as a "third arena of learning" (p. 10) that takes place beyond family and school. A community-based media arts program like GIFTS responds to this need and presents pedagogical insights that can offer urban youth an alternate to cultivate creative and social engagement. Narratives from GIFTS indicate that youth learned more than merely how to negotiate filmmaking processes informed by professional practice; they had an opportunity to create new working relationships and to advance their evolving self-identities.

Current and former GIFTS' participants valued learning space where social interaction and dynamic relationships occurred along with their filmmaking experiences. This participation should not be viewed as an exotic island experience for urban youth; it represented conditions that allow cultivation of a free space where learners were transformed from passive receivers to active advocates for learning. It enabled a dialogue between communities of educators in media arts programs across geographical locations, and an approach for urban youth to study filmmaking processes in an unfamiliar context that facilitated their individual and collective exploration and knowledge construction.

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