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A Story of Conflict and Collaboration:

Media Literacy, Video Production and Disadvantaged Youth

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Abstract

Media literacy educators talk about the importance of developing essential social skills, such as collaboration, by using video production in the classroom. Through media production students acquire types of literacy that are still considered problematic in traditional classrooms but that are crucial for young people's lives in the twenty-first century. Video production with disadvantaged youth can also play a role of art therapy, where students use their creativity to come to terms with traumatizing pasts. This paper offers an account of a media literacy intervention that involved making videos with a class of foster youth. Using the methodology of portraiture, I describe highlights and pitfalls of collaboration that one of the teams experienced. I focus on moments of conflict, unleashed creativity and transformation that were brought by one video project.

Keywords: media literacy, video production, collaboration, disadvantaged youth, portraiture

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Collaboration and Education

Collaboration is an essential social skill. One can write a poem on his or her own, but staging a play, constructing a skyscraper or sending a shuttle in space necessitates coordinated efforts of a group of people. Collaboration means mutual respect and trust, ability to articulate one's point of view and listen to opinions of others. However, these are not easy skills, as the road to successful collaboration is paved with conflicts. This is the reason why people should start learning how to work in a team since the early age. Teaching youth to collaborate may become an especially challenging task while working with at-risk youth. Students belonging to this important population may have problems collaborating, especially with adults and under their guidance – because of their mistrust of authority figures (Goodman, 2003).

Historically schools have not been a place where collaboration skills are acquired. The reason for that is the emphasis on individual achievement (Bricker, 1989). Bricker described this situation as unfortunate and today's schools as "morally undesirable places" (p. 97), where students fail to learn social virtues necessary for civic engagement. Nowadays this situation is gradually changing, and a number of educators argue that schools should first of all help children develop social skills, such as communication, collaboration and empathy, and increase their civic engagement (Buckingham, 2003). More emphasis is being put on "multiple intelligences" that include various abilities necessary for being an engaged citizen and a complete person (Gardner, 2006).

Media literacy educators are especially vocal in their critique of the existing educational conventions. They believe that schools need to teach children to critically analyze media by

deconstructing them and creating their own media messages, to express their voices and to understand their role in the democratic society (Hobbs, 1998). Participation in media production is especially important for media literacy education, as it serves several functions. It helps youth express their voices, connect with communities and increase their civic engagement by sharing with peers and adults their opinions about socially important issues (gun violence, drugs, bullying, etc.) (Goodman, 2003). Through media production students acquire types of literacy that are still considered problematic in traditional classrooms but that are crucial for young people's lives in the twenty-first century. Media production is also a useful strategy of engaging students in learning and increasing their motivation (Spires et al., 2012).

A number of scholars have explored complex human phenomenon of collaboration in the area of education (Chavez & Soep, 2005; Camino, 2000; Stack, 2009) and special education (Goodman, 2003). Talking about democracy is a form of collaboration Chavez and Soep (2005) argue that when young people produce media messages together, that makes them aware of their ability to cause social change, and of the importance of team work for successful existence of a society. One of the forms of media production is creating video messages: documentaries, interviews, music videos, etc. A crucial aspect of video production is collaboration, because a team of several people is necessary to create even a short video. The theme of civic engagement is prominent is studies on video production by Stack (2009) and Goodman (2003). For instance, Stack (2009) describes a project between high school youth and adult educators to create public service announcements in which both students and instructors were able to engage in meaningful conversations about strategies for achieving greater social justice. Goodman (2003) analyzes the effectiveness of media production with youth at-risk for reconnecting such students with their communities. He also notes that collaboration as a part of media production may involve

conflicts. Overcoming these conflicts is an important part of the process of learning. In a media production classroom disadvantaged youth may be initially subversive of authority figures, but later on their natural curiosity helps them overcome challenges and benefit from media literacy activities. Although some literature exists on collaboration and what it looks like in the context of video production in an educational setting, this subject appears to be still underexplored, same as collaboration with and between youth at-risk.

One of the disadvantaged groups of children in the United States is youth growing in the foster care system (Reardon & Noblet, 2009). Living in the atmosphere of stress and mistrust, often having to move from home to home and from school to school, foster children may manifest problems communicating with their peers, forming friendships and, as a result, working in a team. Collaboration in media production has been shown to help disadvantaged teenagers articulate their identity and regain the sense of control over their life (Goodman, 2003). However, video production has another important characteristic that is especially relevant in case of foster youth. Producing videos can be a form of art therapy and an exercise of meaning-searching; as such, it can be a transformative experience that will enable some students come to terms with traumatizing pasts (Malchiodi & Gil, 1997, Malchiodi & Perry, 2008).

Media production programs around the world help undeserved youth "to comment on their world, share ideas, and take action on the social issues that are important to them" (Mann, 2011). Children who are used to not being listened to and cared about by adults become empowered by telling their stories and influencing the way others see the world they live in (Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012). According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986), "[e]mpowerment refers to the opportunities a person has for autonomy, responsibility, choice, and authority" (p. 9). By creating videos, children at risk not only are able to reflect on their life situations, but also

take a responsibility in their storytelling choices and exercise authority over what they want and do not want others to know. As a part of media production, children can deconstruct their traumatizing experiences and put them together again as pieces of a puzzle, making their viewers cry or laugh. By playing with interpretations and reactions of those who will hear their stories, young filmmakers can feel their power over life circumstances.

If media production as a part of media literacy curriculum can play a role of art therapy, how does the issue of collaboration fit into the picture? Do conflicts arising in the process of collaboration hamper creativity and diminish therapeutic properties of video production? How strong is the transformative effect of collaborative movie making on children from marginalized populations? These were some of the questions that I had in my mind as I started my observations in media literacy classes with foster children at the University of Rhode Island. The goal of my project was to document and analyze a media literacy intervention, which involved teaching a class of twenty-two foster children to critically deconstruct media messages and create their own stories in teams using Flip cameras. Therefore, the main themes in my observations were collaboration, conflict, creativity and transformation happening in the media literacy classroom in the process of video production.

Describing Creative Process: Portraiture

The methodology that I use for constructing my narrative is portraiture, which was developed in works of Lawrence-Lightfoot (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 2002). Combining features of various qualitative methodologies, such as ethnography and case study, portraiture offers unique opportunities for capturing the complexity of human experience. Lawrence-Lightfoot showed that by blending aesthetics and empiricism this method helps the scholar to describe subtlety of human interactions. It is important to note that, despite the

introduction of aesthetics into the process of academic reasoning, portraiture remains scientifically rigorous.

This method was appropriate for my study for several reasons. First, Lawrence-Lightfoot showed its usefulness for documenting the learning process and the culture of schools (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1985). Second, the fact that aesthetics and creativity are defining features of portraiture makes it useful for documenting studies that investigate processes of creating art works, e.g. videos. Finally, it helped me capture the complexity of interactions that happened while the team that I was focusing on worked on their final video project. The team that I observed consisted of only two participants, two girls. While on the following pages I portrayed personalities of the girls and their interactions as precisely as I could, names and details of the physical appearances have been changed in order to insure anonymity.

Context of the Study: First Star Academy

The current paper is a result of journalistic observations of instructional practices that involved media literacy activities in the form of video production. The observations were made at First Star Academy in the University of Rhode Island, during three weeks in July 2012. First Star is a non-profit organization, whose mission is to help disadvantaged youth. In 2011 First Star started a program that aims at re-introducing youth growing in foster care into the educational system. Because many foster care children often have to move from one set of foster parents to another and as a result constantly change schools, their learning process is periodically disrupted. Also, hardships that some foster children have to endure in foster homes prevent them from focusing on their studies (Reardon & Noblet, 2009).

First Star developed a solution for this problem. Their idea was to familiarize foster children with college life and studies by putting them for a month on campus of a university.

This strategy was conceived as a way to demystify university for foster children and give them an opportunity to earn their first college credits. Designed to start as a one month intervention, the program, named First Star Academy, is supposed to help children to stay in touch with the university environment by bringing them back to campus in the summer for five consecutive years before they are ready to apply to college. In-between summers students meet for monthly classes.

Pedagogy: Introducing Media Literacy

In 2012 twenty-two foster children came to the University Rhode Island to study English, math, art and two media literacy courses: Videography and Social Networks, taught by instructors from the Harrington School of Communication and Media. Students were taking classes on campus, and most of the meetings for the media literacy classes took place at Curriculum Media Library (CML) space at the campus library.

The children were living in a fraternity house and taking classes for almost four weeks. During this time they had media literacy classes five days of the week. While in the Social Networks course they were learning how to use Internet responsibly, the Videography offered them an opportunity to engage in media production. Using Flip cameras and library computers they were learning how to shoot videos and edit them. By the end of the Academy the students finished three video projects: a commercial, a music video and a final video for which they could choose any format. Working in groups, students created the total of thirty videos that were then shown at the final screening.

Although I was present during the media literacy classes in the capacity of participant observer, I often played a role of an instructor, answering students' questions and helping them

solve various problems in the classroom. That created a necessary level of trust and rapport between me and the students, which let me observe their interactions unobtrusively.

Collaboration in the Learning Context

Collaboration was a burning issue during our classes. For the first two video projects the instructors divided the class into groups, and many students were not happy with their partners. However, it was an important exercise, and the instructors explained to students that adults do not always choose their colleagues. From the difficulties that the students were experiencing as they tried to work in teams, it was evident that school has not been teaching them how to collaborate.

For some children, the lack of basic collaboration skills was exacerbated by trust issues that they had as a result of being in the foster care system. These bad communicators had hard time articulating their ideas, listening to others, giving constructive feedback and respecting their peers' opinions. They were also mistrustful towards adults who were working with them in the program. I witnessed one student reacting to an instructor's promise that the Academy's sponsors will come to the final screening with the sarcastic: "Why are you lying to us?", and another student who, being in a bad mood, proclaimed: "I do not trust anybody". At the same time, some children showed a great collaborative potential and were receptive to instructors' advice. Interestingly, almost all children (even the least collaborative ones) changed their behavior when they were around a student in the wheel chair. They were attentive to her, patient and eager to help. I believe that it shows that all of them have collaborative potential, which can be developed by systematically engaging these children in team assignments.

When for the first two video projects the students needed to work with partners whom they had not chosen, their attempts to collaborate often ended up in conflicts. I was particularly

interested in this dynamics. According to Robinson (2001) schools kill creativity and hamper students' motivation for learning and discovery. My task was to understand whether giving the First Star Academy students an opportunity to rediscover their creative potential would help them deal with collaboration difficulties.

For the last project the rules changed. The students could themselves decide with whom they wanted to work. Also, this project was the closest to producing an art work. Teams could choose any video format they wanted, and several groups decided to make short movies. The students were asked to create a video about problems that they had encountered in the foster care system, the problems that they wanted the world to know. However, the children could choose any other subject, and some, in fact, did so.

During every class meeting I was taking field notes that became the data for my research. For this paper I decided to focus on one particular group working on their final video. I wanted to tell one story of conflict, collaboration and transformation that were triggered by the process of creative storytelling.

Using Portraiture: Megan and Donna's Collaboration and Conflict

Observing the class of foster children who worked in small groups producing videos I witnessed many moments of failure and success. Some of them can be classified as typical. A number of children were unprepared to overcome conflicts arising in the process of collaboration. A minor disagreement was enough to make them run away – physically (going to another part of the room) or emotionally (becoming defensive or withdrawn). Others were more collaboration savvy. They were consistently able to work out their differences with each other. By the end of the first project I already knew each kid's behavioral patterns and often was able to predict their next move.

Some stories, however, were extraordinary. These were unexpected transformations that happened when unleashed creativity broke negative patterns and helped children to overcome their lack of confidence, trust, or motivation. A story that I want to focus on in this paper deals with successful collaboration between two girls who were so inspired by the final project that they created a team of adults and energized them with their enthusiasm.

Who is this slim girl with shoulder-length black hair loudly talking to a group of peers, as they are trying to come up with ideas about the music video? It is Megan, trying to explain to her classmates that her suggestion is the best one. With a fringe always falling over her eyes, she was the last one in class whom I could envision successfully overcoming conflicts. Megan could be nice when she wanted to. However, when the girl felt threatened (which happened all too often), she would become pushy and verbally aggressive. Over the course of the three weeks in the Academy, on several occasions she brought some of her classmates to tears. Yet I could feel that she was not mean by nature. Rather, things that she had experienced prior to coming into the foster care and the rough life as a foster child taught her to attack first. I could guess about some of her trials by an ugly scar on her left cheek and sarcastic remarks that she made about life and other people.

Although Megan did initially have several friends in the Academy, some of them were soon turned off by her aggressive behavior. Students with whom she worked on the first two projects in the Videography class did not want to be in one team with her anymore. A sociometric survey administered by the instructors before the final project in order to determine students' collaboration preferences confirmed her lack of popularity. When students were asked with whom they would love and would hate to work together, many named Megan as the worst

possible "colleague". So Megan, in her baggy jeans and inevitably dirty t-shirt was often seen sitting at the table by herself, quite happy it seemed, to be left alone with her new netbook.

Donna was one of a few who genuinely enjoyed interacting with Megan. This tall girl with heavy-rimmed glasses looked very different from tomboy Megan. She often wore a long dress with big pink flowers, which, as she once confessed to me, was her favorite outfit as it was a present from her late mother. Donna seemed to admire Megan's energy and leadership skills, despite her rough edges. They were not always friendly to each other because Megan could make even those who enjoyed her company lose their temper. However, for the final project in the Videography class the two decided to work together. Megan took the leadership role choosing to create a short movie telling a story of how she got into the foster care system. Donna was happy to participate.

Megan's transformation during the project was astonishing. Although the girl did have one serious clash with Donna, she was able to work in a team not only with her peer but also with several adults who were recruited to act in the movie. Donna and Megan divided responsibilities, wrote a detailed script with dialogues and used it to help the actors to create the story that the girls had envisioned. I was one of the seven adults who agreed to help, and I enjoyed working with the team and to see Donna and Megan's enthusiasm as well as their maturity dealing with the large cast.

Several factors must have contributed to the change that I witnessed in Megan. First of all, she was given an opportunity to tell her story in a friendly and supportive environment. The instructors and First Star staff members were helpful and encouraging. Second, the nature of the assignment must have met Megan's need to work through the painful past. Creative storytelling

through video production is known to have therapeutic effects. When people recount traumatic

events of their lives using camera, they are able to detach themselves from unpleasant memories

and look at their own life through the eyes of a distant observer. When Donna chose to tell her

story of becoming a foster child, she must have intuitively felt an opportunity for an emotional

release.

From Collaboration to Conflict and Back

For the final project the instructors chose a hands-off approach. Having introduced the

topic (the foster care system and its problems), they let the students decide what genre they want

to work in – ad, music video, short documentary or fiction. Teams were not obliged to show their

storyboards to the instructors, although they were encouraged to structure their work the same as

with the first two projects. On Sunday when the students were asked to decide with whom they

wanted to do a final project, Megan and Donna did not need encouragement to work together. In

fact, when in the sociometric survey all students was asked to indicate three people they would

like to be their partners, the girls named each other.

On Monday the girls arrived to class full of enthusiasm. They had already discussed what

genre they wanted to work in and what story they wanted to tell. It was going to be a short movie

about the way Megan ended up with her current foster parents. Megan, with her green eyes

glittering from under the fringe, explained that she had decided to be an actor, playing herself.

Donna wanted to be a videographer. After shooting the scenes, they were going to do the editing

together, using a song that they both liked as a soundtrack. As the story was going to involve

several people (Megan's parents, a teacher, a DCYF worker, her first foster parents and the

current foster father), the girls were discussing an opportunity to recruit First Star staff members as their actors.

Wednesday was an important day. By the time Donna and Megan arrived, they had already talked with several staff members, asking them to participate. As other teams were also trying to recruit people for their films, negotiation skills were necessary to figure out which adults could be working with each group. Megan and Donna needed more actors than anybody else, and their efforts recruiting cast members were impressive. They approached several adults present in the classroom, coherently described their project, and expressed their gratitude for those who were able to help.

The next step was to write a script. Megan and Donna's team was the only one to write down all dialogues for their characters. Having occupied the whole table at the CML, they were emotionally discussing the characters and interactions that those were supposed to have in the video. Then Megan accurately wrote down dialogues, as Donna was leaning over the pieces of paper scattered around the table. Having finished this task, the girls asked a librarian to help them make copies for every actor. Then they distributed the copies, quickly chose shooting locations and started working with the camera. Giving instructions to their actors, Donna and Megan showed good communication skills, and they did not forget to be polite and grateful. For example, after the team finished one of shots that involved me, Donna told me in an assertive and positive voice: "Great job!" After the shooting was over, the girls again thanked everybody who had been helping them.

There were almost no disagreements in this team up until the editing. A serious clash happened when the girls were discussing the way to incorporate the music in the video. They

chose the song "You raise me up" by Josh Groban. Donna wanted the music to be louder than the actors' voices. Megan believed that dialogues should be clearly heard. Neither of the two wanted to compromise, and after a passionate argument, Megan went to another side of the room to complain to several staff members sitting there about Donna's "inappropriate" behavior. An intervention by adults was necessary to help the girls find a compromise. In the end, music was still quite loud, but the conversations between the characters could be understood.

On Thursday Donna and Megan needed a little extra time to finish editing. After the screening, they went in front of the class to talk about the video and answer their peers' questions. The girls seemed very satisfied with the project and their classmates' reactions, although there seemed to be still some tension about the music volume. When one of the viewers asked them about this issue, Megan gave Donna an angry look: "I told her, I told her, but she did not listen to me!" Donna sneered back. However, their peers' excitement about the video overshadowed the girls' personal conflict. When Donna and Megan went back to their seats, their faces were glowing.

Peek into Megan's Life

The movie created by Megan and Donna is called "Peek into Megan's life as a foster kid". It is four minutes long. The song "You raise me up" by Josh Groban is a soundtrack, which is sometimes louder than the actors' voices. Although at times characters' words cannot be discerned, enough can be heard to understand what they are talking about.

There are eight characters: Megan (played by herself), her real parents (two staff members of the First Star Academy), a teacher (head librarian of the CML at URI), a DCYF worker (me), Megan's first foster parents (a librarian and an instructor) and her second foster

father (the librarian's husband). Donna was a videographer, or, as it is indicated in the film's titles, "camera woman". All shots were filmed in or in front of the building of the URI library.

The video starts with Megan's real parents arguing. The father comes late, the mother confronts him about it and he hits her. The next shot is Megan jumping from a chair and shouting at them: "Stop fighting!" In the next scene the girl is talking with her teacher. The teacher is asking why Megan's grades are slipping. Initially the girl refuses to explain what is going on. However, encouraged by the teacher, she explains her the situation at home: "Well, my parents are always fighting. My dad hits my mom. There is no one there to help me with my homework. It's just so hard. They always come home late. There's no one there to cook me dinner. I don't know how to cook. I might set the house on fire. I hear strange noises outside at night." The teacher promises to find help.

In the fourth shot the teacher goes to a DCYF worker and tells what she has heard from the girl. The DCYF worker says that she will investigate the situation. The next scene shows the DCYF worker talking to Megan's parents. They are being informed that the girl will be taken away. The parents protest, as the mother starts crying. The fifth shot shows the DCYF worker talking to Megan, explaining that she has to be taken from her parents because they are not responsible enough: "Now I am going to take you to your new home". "Woopty doo" – says the girl with a sarcastic hand gesture. In the sixth shot the DCYF worker introduces Megan to her first foster parents.

Apparently, the girl was not happy in this house, because the following shot shows her running away. With her back to the camera, she runs down the stairs and along the road leading from the house. For a brief moment Megan stops and looks back, but then continues running

down the long shadowy tree lane. The final eighth shot shows how Megan was introduced to her current foster father. First we see the man sitting on the stairs in front of his house. Then Megan and the DCYF worker approach him, the man gets up and the worker introduces the girl. The sun is shining bright, lighting up the faces of the girl and her new father.

This final scene is followed by one of the most interesting features of the video: bloopers. Although the story told by Donna and Megan was undoubtedly sad, the girls were having fun filming it and laughed a lot in the process. There is no laughter in the video itself, but sever scenes had to be shot again and again because the actors could not stop giggling. One of such scenes was a conversation between the DCYF worker and the girl's real parents: "Why are you taking our baby Megan away?" – "Because you are not responsible enough!" The actors had hard time concentrating on being serious, and several shots had to be taken before the girls were satisfied with the results. However, they were far from being upset by our "disrespectful" behavior. On the contrary, Megan and Donna were laughing with us. Moreover, the girls so much liked the shots of the actors trying to stay serious, that they put these shots in the end of the video as bloopers.

This example shows that making the movie about the foster care system was a cathartic experience for Donna and Megan. Although the final project tells Megan's story, Donna, as well as many other children in the class, could relate to it. Using the medium of film both girls were able to look at their traumatic childhood through the eyes of a distant observer. They were not victims anymore. They controlled the situation by choosing actors, locations, angles and words for telling the story. Thus the media literacy classroom combined with art therapy helped Donna and Megan to come to terms with their pasts.

Becoming Complete

Theorizing about ways to teach oppressed populations, Freire (1970) developed a theory of emancipatory education, which talks about the impact of involving students on social and emotional levels on their performance in class. The high motivation to participate comes from students' awareness that their voices can be heard and their stories can change the world. The children who participated in the Videography class at the University of Rhode Island in the summer of 2012 were offered an opportunity to do something meaningful for them. Those who accepted the challenge and created narratives about their lives had an empowering and transformative experience. The empowerment came from the understanding that they can overcome conflicts and learn to use support of their peers and adults. Although many First Star students had initially been distrustful and antagonistic, when four weeks after the beginning of the program they came to the big university hall for the screening of their videos, the atmosphere was completely different. All shining and dressed-up, they laughed and cried together. The students were proud of their films and grateful to the instructors. We all felt a part of one big family.

That does not mean a "happily ever after" kind of ending. The children had to go back to their foster parents and foster homes. Megan was not magically transformed into a perfect communicator. When we met her later in follow-up monthly classes, we could see that she is still lacking some essential social skills. However, it does not mean that our efforts as media literacy educators ended up in failure. We need to stay realistic and admit that the transformation is slow and subtle. The summer Academy was just an initial stage, a brief intervention. What it showed – to us and to Megan – is that this girl is able to work in a team when she wants to. Now our goal is to help her understand how to develop her collaboration skills and use them most effectively.

According to Michelle (2009), "[t]he goal of collaboration should not necessarily be consensus, but the willingness of participants to look at the contradictions and disagreements they have with each other but are also contained in the videos they produce" (p. 20). The collaboration between Megan and Donna was not always perfect. They did had their fights but also they moments of success. Even in the best of teams collaboration has its highs and lows. One of the important goals of the project was to show the students that they did not always have to agree with each other in order to produce a result that will make them proud of themselves.

Another important goal was to unleash the children's creativity, their potential for learning through discovery. Creativity, an essential human skill, is something that, as some scholars claim, school systems have been successfully robbing us of (Robinson, 2011). Creativity and freedom are the best motivation and a guarantee for high performance and satisfaction (Pink, 2011). The transformative potential of the final project in the Videography class can be explained by the fact that the students were given an opportunity to tell their stories in their own way, an opportunity that some of them have never had before.

Media literacy educators and advocates still need to do go a long way to learn how to adjust media production activities for various students' needs. So far there is no ideal solution. Telling the story of her life, Megan was not changed forever. She may now have new tools for dealing with her communication and collaboration problems, but she still needs to learn how to use them. "Peek into Megan's life as a foster kid" tells a simple story of a girl who had to become a part of the foster care system due to immaturity and irresponsibility of her parents. Paradoxically, the video's shaky shots, unprofessional actors and the script written in half an hour have a much more powerful effect on a viewer than mainstream films, whose polished sterile images and stereotypic representations do not move us anymore. This video helps the

audience look at the foster care system with the eyes of a child and question wrong assumptions created by the lack of information and the popular culture. But perhaps even more importantly "Peek into Megan's life" was a powerful experience for the girls who created this short film. Although Megan was not magically changed in the process, and still remains in a way socially handicapped, this project helped her make an important step in the right direction, the direction of becoming complete.

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