Leveraging Digital Multimedia Training for At-Risk Teens

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INTRODUCTION

The digital divide exists in poor countries and wealthy countries, the country side and cities, and across age groups. Useful solutions when trying to "bridge" the digital divide should include collaboration with local groups in order to better understand and meet their needs (Eglash, 2004). The most far-reaching examples of these community-oriented, information and communication technology (ICT) products and services result in social and economic impacts beyond just the use of technology—sometimes referred to as community informatics. This paper offers one such solution where an extremely cost—effective, community-based ICT program was successfully piloted in order to improve the computer and digital multimedia literacy of at-risk teenagers, provide job skills, open up new career opportunities, and begin to improve the overall economic capital of the community. While piloted in an inner-city, the program represents a best practice that is equally applicable to a small rural setting or to a regional educational initiative. More specifically, this paper describes the project, the curriculum, and—through the use of a questionnaire and video interviews—the students' experiences taking the class.

BACKGROUND

In July and August of 2002, two organizations combined forces to create a special six-week learning opportunity for 15 at-risk teenagers from Boston, Massachusetts' inner-city neighborhoods. The goal for the class was to learn film and computer-based multimedia skills, employ those skills through working in teams, and develop a video documentary. What distinguishes this educational opportunity from others is how computer technology was so actively intertwined in both creating and enhancing the educational experience.

During the first half of the six-week program, students learned about film history, utilized computer software to create and edit audio, music, and video tracks, and practiced performing the different roles necessary to create a documentary—producer, director, interviewer, cameraperson, and editor. The students spent the last three weeks working in teams applying their newly learned skills toward the creation of the documentary. The group assignment was to create an actual documentary. Within each team, each student chose a specific role to focus upon in order to develop a depth of skills in that area.

In an extremely brief amount of time the students, ages 13 to 18, had the opportunity to gain professional media experience and build confidence in a variety of technical and team skills. In the process, they utilized their full range of learning styles—from visual, to auditory, to kinesthetic—and exercised their critical thinking skills both individually and in a team setting as the hundreds of details in developing and refining a multi-track, multimedia documentary were worked through.

The sponsoring group for the class was ABCD (Action for Boston Community Development), a private, non-profit, human services agency promoting self-help for people and neighborhoods that serves over 100,000 low-income Boston-area residents annually (ABCD, 2003). One of ABCD's programs, SummerWorks, is a summer jobs program for Boston's low-income, at-risk youth that has been in place for 35 years. For the summer of 2002, the SummerWorks program provided over 1,300 inner-city youth with paid, 25 hour a week community-based summer jobs that included mentoring, tutoring, and educational support. "SummerWorks enrollees worked in social service agencies, downtown non-profit and government agencies, museums, day camps, libraries, health centers, hospitals, and more. Enrollees also participated in workshops that provide job readiness and skill-building workshops" (ABCD, 2002). One of the SummerWorks 2002 opportunities was a special pilot program.

Fifteen of the students who were hired for ABCD's SummerWorks program were randomly selected to participate in a special skills-building program where they would create a video documentary of ABCD's 2002 SummerWorks Program. The students had no prior knowledge of what they would be asked to create, came from

various locations, and had no prior experience working with one another. Only two of the students had any previous experience creating digital video or digital audio. No academic credit was given for participation in the program.

The LCG (The Learning Community Group) of Boston, based on years of experience in the media production industry, designed and built the hardware and selected and customized the software needed to create a video documentary. TheLCG is a technology research and teaching organization dedicated to technology access and mastery by all people, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or economic bracket. They develop programs that provide emerging technology instruction in a multitude of diverse settings: public and private schools, homeless shelters, libraries, community centers, government agencies and corporate offices (TheLCG, 2003).

The technology component of the class involved the utilization of The LCG Mobile Media Studio (MMS). The MMS is a professional and portable digital audio, video, and music production studio. The MMS is used to create and deliver material for the Internet, broadcast television, or a host of other CD and DVD media distribution formats. The hardware components included a high-performance digital audio/video workstation as well as high-end audio production equipment, including speakers, microphones, and noise-canceling headsets. The software components included professional-level programs for: creating electronic music, recording and editing professional audio tracks, recording and editing professional video tracks, creating CDs, and streaming media on the Web. Student support for using the MMS included printed guides and an online support community through forums (TheLCG, 2002).

The class met five days a week, from 9 A.M. until 3 P.M., for six weeks. The course was taught by a master instructor and film producer from TheLCG and assisted by a staff member from ABCD.

THE CURRICULUM

The overall objective of the six-week program was to develop a 25-minute, multimedia documentary about ABCD's 2002 SummerWorks program. Curriculum objectives leading to the overall objective included:

- Study film history
- Comprehend and use film language
- Gain media awareness
- Gain experience in executing every production role on a film or video set
- Develop film and video production skills
- Use digital video editing technologies fluidly
- Hone the art of storytelling
- Develop skills for working in teams

The curriculum was broken down into modules as described in the following sections.

Module 1, Week 1: Objective = Crash Course in Film History / Photography / Cinematography / Film Language

The first week had four major components:

- Description of class/job objectives
- A crash course on film history, photography, cinematography, and film language
- Initial exposure to the cameras and the video editing software
- Team building and interviewing skills

Although the crash course in film and production concepts was considered "too much like high school" by some in the class, they were able to apply the concepts taught in class effectively. One assignment challenged the students to find examples of the concepts on TV. Students accurately identified:

- An Eisenstein montage within a music video
- The rule of thirds being used on a game show
- Joseph Campbell's monomythic arc being followed in an episode of "SpongeBob Squarepants"

After one week, the students were ready to work as a production team to develop their first film short.

Module 2, Week 2 & 3: Cross-Job Training

During weeks 2 and 3, the class was broken evenly into two groups. The students, in essence, became employees. The students rotated from producer, director, interviewer, camera-person, and editor, trying every position at a number of sites around the Boston area. For example:

- Producers and directors contacted the site they visited, set up an arrival time, and scouted the location beforehand to get ideas of how to capture the site
- Camera-people worked on video taping locations and gained experience using the camera
- Editors imported the resulting footage and edited it to music in order to gain experience in using the editing software

Students typically visited one site per day.