

Teaching Youth Media through International Exchange

by
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Introduction

Youth media organizations have special potential to connect young people across cultures using digital media technologies. These organizations are shifting pedagogical practices to accommodate emerging ways of knowing and being among young people in cross cultural contexts, often incorporating peer-to-peer learning as a key piece of the learning. This research examines the use of strategies that allow youth media organizations to promote exchange by using new media technologies to communicate, build relationships, and create media art. In order to do this, this study looks at the work of AMIGOS de las Americas and Centro Tecnologia SATIC XXI, Vinculacion. Instituto Estatal de Educacion Publica de Oaxaca in Oaxaca, Mexico. These two organizations work together to unite young people from the U.S. and from communities in Oaxaca to collaborate on digital media projects. This research is framed theoretically by Katherine Hayles' work about the virtual, Brian Goldfarb's ideas about youth partnership and peer-to-peer learning, and Paolo Freire's ideas about education for social progress and collaboration.

In addressing the question: What are the most effective strategies for educators aiming to achieve cross cultural understanding through media education, factors that affect the learning process in a multicultural setting include: social and media environment, and their impact on learning, communicating, and teaching;

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level of familiarity with media art practices; and gender. These factors affect the ability to develop leadership potential in international youth peer groups, as well as the ability to use media production in order to foster critical thinking skills and involvement of youth leaders in community development.

AMIGOS is an international organization that links the youth of the Americas to carry out small scale projects with the objective of promoting youth leadership, community development, and cross cultural understanding. AMIGOS places U.S. teens and young adults in rural Latin America communities to collaborate with local youth on a range of small-scale development and education initiatives. AMIGOS is staffed in-country by youth who have participated in the programs and are in their early twenties, typically college students and students just out of college. AMIGOS' mission is:

Amigos de las Americas (AMIGOS) builds partnerships to empower young leaders, advance community development and strengthen multicultural understanding in the Americas. (AMIGOS de las Americas, 2009)

AMIGOS's project in Oaxaca is the only of its kind, and while AMIGOS is not a media organization, in this case it uses media tools in order to achieve its mission. For all of these reasons, this organization was chosen as the case study to examine how media can be used to build international education and social justice initiatives.

Literature Review

This literature review will examine the following bodies of work in order to review what has been done in the fields of virtuality and youth media pedagogy. The work in virtuality illuminates the ways youth are interacting with the world through the proliferation of media devices. This literature will also be used to understand the process young people go through as they begin to use new media technologies to engage with each other.

Virtuality

Changes in our knowledge base and mode of interaction with the world are deeply intertwined with new media technologies for young people and compounded by an ever more global environment. It is an environment in which "the postcolonial situations where cultural artifacts flow between unlikely places, and nothing is sacred, permanent, or sealed off" (Dimitriadis, 2008, p. 23). Youth interact consistently with global cultural production and the possibility of extending relationships across differences like distance and language due to the proliferation of new media technologies. This proliferation of new media devices, coupled with intense globalization, has "alter[ed] the sense ratios of patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 114). New ways of sensing

and interacting with the world necessitate new pedagogical practices in youth media in response.

As youth increasingly have more access to new media technologies they “may enter into symbiotic relationships with intelligent machines” (Hayles, 1999, p. 284). It is these new relationships that are altering the ways in which young people relate to each other. This is apparent in environments in which youth are using new media technologies in order to communicate, send or share information, or form relationships. Hayles supposes that the integration of new media devices into the fabric of our lives extends “embodied awareness in highly specific, local, and material ways that would be impossible without electronic prosthesis” (Hayles, 1999, p. 287). This idea relates to the ways in which youth in cross-cultural programs media programs relate and create because their exposure to new media extends their understanding of the world and of each other’s humanity.

Education that Fosters Caring and Critical Consciousness

Nel Noddings, in her book *The Challenge to Care in Schools* suggests that education should be structured around learning to care. Noddings writes that children and young people should learn to care in many capacities and that all of these capacities should be addressed in education. Learning to care for the self, for others, for animals and nature, for objects and possessions are some of the topics she highlights. I will use concept of learning to care as a mode through which Freire’s idea of consciousness-raising and AMIGOS’ objective of empowerment can be reached. The blurring of space and time through the use of new media technologies and might allow youth to form connections between caring in many different capacities. It may be that new media spaces connect learning to care about diverse topics in new ways.

Learning to care through the use of a variety of mediums about a variety of topics is important in addressing the learning styles of diverse people. This could take the form of learning to care about different others through digital communication, or learning to care about cultural ideas and traditions through the creation of media pieces of cultural ideas and traditions. Educational scholar Howard Gardner posits that individuals learn best through different modes of knowing and acquiring knowledge including linguistic, mathematical-logical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist styles of learning (Gardner, 1983). Noddings idea that productive education is structured around care supports learning in all of these modes and advocates that learners be able to choose the mode that works best for them for further study. Noddings ideas about caring provide a methodology for realizing justice-oriented education.

Freire and Social Change

Paolo Freire, a prominent education and social change theorist, writes, “dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and its

people” (Freire & Horton, 1990, p. 39). Often, youth media organizations aim to create cross cultural dialogue and international understanding, so fostering a dialogical space is crucial in youth media settings. Goldfarb also addresses the consciousness-raising possibility in youth media when he writes that media “projects tend to be exercises in political consciousness-raising” and that through production, students are able to “make meaningful connections to their communities” (Goldfarb, 2002, p. 72). While AMIGOS is not fostering a political consciousness in the sense that it aims to get young people involved in the government, AMIGOS does ascribe to an agenda about international understanding and the ability to affect change.

The Freirian framework I use places emphasis on dialogical spaces for learning and on praxis that is informed by values that are change-oriented. I refer to educational spaces grounded in the practice of dialogue and the exchange of ideas by all parties involved. By praxis, I refer to the reflective process of teaching and learning in which theory and practice inform each other. By change oriented, Freire suggests that educational practices should reinforce the skills and capacities that are necessary for individuals and communities to gain the power to transform reality (Freire & Horton, 1990). For Freire, this means that one of the tasks of the educator that is key to success is “to provoke the discovering of need for knowing and never to impose the knowledge whose need was not yet perceived” (Freire & Horton, 1990, p. 66). In this way, Freire believes that the educator plays an integral role in fostering a sense of wonder and a thirst for information. Freire hopes that this sense of wonder is fostered through mutual respect, and that it is begun in a space in which it can continue to grow and be fostered through experiential learning (Freire & Horton, 1990, p. 135) Freire’s main premise is that education should be based on a pedagogy of hope in which the main goal is the development of consciousness. This is a useful analytical framework because it illuminates the deeper values AMIGOS addresses through youth-to-youth work in media in rural Oaxacan communities. This framework will be used in order to think through the ways in which youth involved developed a sense of wonder and empowerment through participation in the media project.

Youth Media Pedagogy

Youth media education scholar Brian Goldfarb (2002) writes that digital platforms are accessible in the education system, the home, and in popular culture. Goldfarb points to the power of youth media production that is “enriched when young people assume pedagogical roles among their peers” (Goldfarb, 2002, p. 111). Goldfarb concludes that peer-to-peer learning has a “strong currency in computer discourse... no single medium has been alluded to more widely for its potential to facilitate community interaction and participatory education” (Goldfarb, 2002, p. 111-112). When knowledge about and exposure to new media is unevenly distributed, as it is between AMIGOS volunteers and AMIGOS host community youth,

Goldfarb's ideas about peer education will illuminate how media education can be used as a format for international exchange.

Methodology

To conduct this research, surveys, interviews and focus groups were used. Cross-sectional surveys (Merrigan & Huston, 2004, p. 88) were sent to all participants in the Digital Culture project. Ego-centered network analysis was used to understand the survey response, which "aims to describe a system of social relationship from one individual communicators point of view" (Merrigan & Huston, 2004, p. 90). Ego-centered network analysis permitted me to "compare different people's views of the system with one another, and to look for areas of confirmation and disconfirmation" (Merrigan & Huston, 2004, p. 91). This illuminated cross-cultural relationships and pedagogy in youth media.

After the surveys, interviews were conducted. A sample of participants who were representative of the most successful media projects were selected to be interviewed (Merrigan & Huston, 2004, p. 89). Projects were deemed successful based on the amount of media projects produced, the use of a variety of mediums in order to produce media projects, and the existence of an online portal in which these projects are archived. Participants were asked to answer questions about six larger ideas, including: pedagogy, the exposition of the media work, challenges and successes, intergenerational programming, successes/challenges and long-term learning.

Finally, I conducted focus groups with very small groups of participants. Focus groups were a powerful way to collect data because "ideas that would not otherwise have been considered are generated through group interaction, and the small size allows for all group members to participate" (Kramer & Pier, 1999, p. 19). The focus group centered "on participants perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors to explore the project from the perspective of the participants rather than the researcher... focus groups may also increase the level of self-disclosure for participants from cultures that are more collective than individual" (Merrigan & Huston, 2004, p. 92). Focus groups were semi-structured. In summary, a variety of methodological strategies were used in order to gather information about the way in which the program was actualized and how it affected the young people involved.

Program Description

The communities of Santa Lucia de Ocotlan and San Andres Zautla, and each of their respective programs, provided the source of content for this study. Both communities are located in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, which is in the South East portion of Mexico and are located about 1.5 hours from the capital of the state, Oaxaca City. Both communities identify as Zapoteco, though only Santa Lucia de Ocotlan speaks Zapoteco. The communities elected to participate in this

program because, as media devices and technologies become ever more present in the lives of their youth and children, they hoped to continue to provoke interest in their young people in cultural traditions and history. The project brings these two ideas together by teaching youth to use media tools in order to tell stories about cultural heritage and preserve traditions and language. Both communities had relatively low access to computers and camera equipment. This project creates links between young people and older people that can result in provocative intergenerational partnerships and teaching and learning opportunities around technology and indigenous culture.

The American volunteers who were responsible for teaching the Oaxacan youth how to use video and still cameras and computers ranged in age from 18-22. They had knowledge about social networking, blogging, video creation and uploading, and photography from their personal lives in the United States. The Oaxacan youth who participated ranged in age from 11-16 years in age. They had some previous experience with computers and personal cell phones, but for many of them this was the first time they had used still and video cameras.

The media classes were taught to two groups of young people in age-similar classes. They made short video and photo projects, kept a blog on which they wrote and posted the projects, and responded to each other's projects in writing. Students did a series of smaller projects and then, in both communities, did one larger project. Both communities also allowed youth to work in partnerships or trios and to rotate through different mediums, trying out audio, video, and photography before choosing a format for their final project. Youth posted their initial work as well as final projects on blogs.

In both communities, the youth used community leaders and the elderly as resources. Community leaders were invested in motivating youth, as they found it important youth take an active interest in indigenous culture. After the youth finished their media projects, they held expositions to showcase their work. One community focused on the presentation of the media work. Those in attendance were mainly the families and friends of the youth involved. After showing their work, the youth answered questions and discussed the importance of making media pieces about indigenous culture. Months later, these youth made podcasts about the right to indigenous language use in schools.

In the other community, the exposition was enormous. It was not only a place to show the media work, but also a stage for the local dance troupe, a place for the elderly to tell stories and legends from the past, and the site of a photography competition. The parents group collected a small donation from everyone who voted in the photography contest to raise funds for the school. There were more than 2,000 people at the event, and local press came from the city as well.

Youth in both communities expressed that beyond technical skills, they experienced significant growth in how to work in groups. A local teacher said that youth had been increasingly vocal on issues of the local language, Zapoteco. Several months later, the Mexican State wanted to ban Zapoteco from the school. The

youth who participated in the AMIGOS program used the media skills and the equipment from the summer to make podcasts about the importance of Zapoteco and the injustice of banning Zapoteco from the school system. The podcasts were broadcast all over the state, and the community won the right to continue speaking Zapoteco in the school. This is a major success in terms of sustainability on the AMIGOS Digital Culture project, and proves that the youth involved learned media skills in a manner that allowed them access to resources to affect change.

International Youth Media Findings

This section will discuss findings from research on the AMIGOS Digital Culture project in the Oaxacan communities of Santa Lucia and San Andres Zautla in relation to the theoretical frameworks offered by scholars of digital studies, transformative pedagogy, and media education. The findings address the project's emphasis on youth leadership and the media environment, the ability of media-familiar youth to teach media, the success of community and youth leadership and international exchange, the process of critical learning, the strength of the effort to foster community development and social change, and the pedagogy that underlies the entire AMIGOS program.

Youth Leadership and the Media Environment

The program is built on the premise that young people from the United States have the skills and capacities necessary to teach simple technology and media to youth from rural communities in Oaxaca. AMIGOS believes the American volunteers possess media skills based on the fact that they have spent their lives in an ecology saturated by media (Beaman, 2008). This approach proactively addresses the fact that there is a massive digital divide in terms of who, on global scale, has access to media and technology on a regular basis (Dimitriadis, 2008). Additionally, the program addresses in a proactive manner a human rights issue: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 17 the right of all people to have access to the latest technological advancements. The youth to youth structure capitalizes on the energy of young Americans to collaborate with young Mexicans to achieve access to media technology and to media literacy.

The structure of the peer education based youth media program is built upon the basis that American youth live in a hyper-mediated world and experience the world through a variety of mediated communication methods and mediated spaces. It suggests that the American youth have an inherent connection with media because of their environment and that they are able to experience the world through digital technologies.

The ways American youth connect with and use media within their home environment affects capability for American youth to teach media. This is illuminated by theories of digitization. Media theorist Katherine Hayles writes that within our hypermediated society new media technologies are “extending

embodied awareness in highly specific, local, and material ways that would be impossible without electronic prosthesis” (Hayles, 1999, p. 290). American youth use cell phones, social networking sites, and mobile devices on a daily, even hourly, basis at home to connect with friends and family, get news, and be productive in school (Dimitriadis, 2008). They gain information about the world and interact with the world through new media devices in ways that only become possible in media environments where new media devices proliferate. In Oaxaca, all of these ways of communicating and being do not exist because the environment is not structured through new media devices, and the American youth did not and could not use them to communicate, organize, or connect. The embodied awareness the American youth hold about the world that is enabled through new media devices becomes very apparent when they are removed from the technologies and spaces in which embodied technological awareness no longer functions in ways that are familiar and allow them to communicate and interact with the world and information. For example, while the American youth knew how to blog, interact through social networks, and use video cameras to make vignettes to send to their friends; they expressed confusion about *what* they were supposed to film, create, photograph, and document within the Digital Culture framework in rural Oaxaca. Outside of their own media environment and expected to facilitate leadership through media, they were unsure how to leverage the power of media tools. At home, this may come more naturally as communication and accessing information are done through the media environment and are skills necessary for leadership development.

The American youth bring with them a way of communicating with the world that inherently connects them with a global environment. They already interact with an environment that, through new media technologies, “cultural artifacts flow between unlikely places, and nothing is sacred, permanent, or sealed off” (Dimitriadis, 2008, p. 21). It is perhaps the increased opportunity to interact with cultural artifacts and ideas that increase the opportunity for these American youth to participate in international media programs. Shaviro’s (2003) idea that individuals are part of a networked knowledge base in highly mediated societies explains why the American youth are unable to transfer some media knowledge from that network into a space outside of the network like with a youth group in rural Oaxaca. At the same time, Shaviro’s ideas about networked knowledge also explain why in rural Oaxaca the American and Mexican youth begin to create new networks of knowledge that depend upon the new media devices and technologies they employ in order to gather stories and begin to document their communities and traditions. Through the AMIGOS program, the American and Mexican youth begin to use new media technologies in an environment they have not been used extensively in, and through the use of these technologies they engaged in networked knowledge in order to build new networks of knowledge and to conceive of new ways of stories and knowledge. These networks continue on even as the volunteers leave and are used to collect, store, and use information through the

media devices. An example of this is the podcasts made in order to preserve the right to speak the indigenous language in schools in Santa Lucia. The youth made podcasts about the right to speak indigenous language, and they connected with adults also working on the issue to broadcast the podcasts on local and indigenous radio stations in Oaxaca. This way, they networked with the parents and other youth, and through podcasts and community radio released the information into a larger network of indigenous communities.

This illustrates the building of collective knowledge through the use of the audio devices and computers that were employed to make podcasts. The information was stored digitally, and can be accessed by anyone in the community from the school library where it is stored. Katherine Hayles' (1999) idea that media knowledge "exists not as abstractions but as patterns of daily life learned by practicing actions until they become habitual" (p. 202) directs our attention in this case to the ways in which learning about media tools from other youth, even in informal settings can lead to powerful outcomes. The volunteers in this community shared their knowledge with the youth and they made short, small, seemingly insignificant pieces during the program. As the local youth became more and more familiar with storing knowledge digitally and using the media devices, the knowledge became habitual, and the youth were able to transfer that knowledge into another realm in which they used it to create social change by making and broadcasting podcasts about the right to speak indigenous language in schools. In this way, youth to youth media projects can be very successful even when the youth "media teachers" are not well versed in media education or media production. What they can offer is the ability to show other youth with less access how to use simple tools, and together they can practice the use of media tools until it becomes a habitual, embodied experience. From the point where the youth begin to see their environment as constructed through media tools, community leaders or others involved might be the best suited to direct youth to use these habitual skills in the service of social change or global youth alliance building.

Communicating With and Teaching Media

There is a disconnect between the way the volunteers understand media and their ability to harness that understanding to teach media. This disconnect does not necessarily mean that a media program that is based on peer education cannot be successful, but it does mean peer-to-peer media education programs may come to their successes in different ways and over longer periods of time. It may mean that community leaders are the best people to inspire youth to use newly learned media skills for social change.

To facilitate a media project that fosters youth leadership, media literacy, and critical understanding is difficult for any educator, especially for young facilitators without training in media education. The disconnect between the ability to use media and to teach media is related to geographically specific interaction with

media and mediated spaces. The volunteers shift from the highly mediated space of the U.S. into the much less mediated space of rural Oaxaca, Mexico where they are supposed to teach media. Their U.S.-based media interaction has little to do with creating critical projects or fostering youth leadership and much more to do with understanding, interacting, and communicating. It may be that through teaching other youth to play with media tools and to use them in their daily lives, there is a transformation in the way international youth access the world. This transformation is the ability to access the world through new media and by doing so, enter into networks of knowing. These networks of knowing are built upon new media devices, which in turn allow youth to access power and affect social change in ways that were before impossible.

In the less-mediated spaces of Santa Lucia and San Andres Zautla, the American youth are no longer part of the networks of understanding and communication that facilitate their lives in the US. Instead, they enter into an emergent space with the youth from Oaxaca. The Oaxacan youth are also out of their own media environment, having used computers and digital tools in the past but not having ever used them in this format or for this reason. As a result, during the project the American and Oaxacan youth together create new uses for the media and technology they use as well as new networks of knowing and new ways of gathering and storing information. In this multicultural setting, the American and Oaxacan youth are attempting to forge relationships with each other and also to collectively identify ways to communicate through mediums that may or may not be familiar, and that also are used in new and unfamiliar ways. While there is tremendous potential for innovation, not all youth will be able to move through the project in ways that result in critical understanding or youth leadership.

Gender

Gender appears to be a factor in the success of the youth as well. While gender is a recurrent theme in many youth media projects, gender is not an issue that AMIGOS directly addresses. It is interesting to note that while AMIGOS volunteers are overwhelmingly female, all volunteers in both of these communities were male. In San Andres Zautla, nearly all of the participants, and all the youth who participated consistently in the program, were female. In Santa Lucia, there was more of a mixed gender class but there were still more girls than boys involved. It is especially important for girls to have empowering media-making experiences, in light of gender-based discrimination that adversely affects girls, both communities and in mass-produced media (Kearny, 2006). Positive media-making experiences can be transformative for girls and support them in being able to access power in new ways, as well as give them the language to talk about oppression. Youth media scholar Mary Kearney, in her book *Girls Make Media* writes,

Girls' fears of failure, which are exacerbated by commercial discourse that encourages them to scrutinize their bodies and find imperfection, often prevent them from engaging in activities that are unfamiliar. Such anxieties seem particularly heightened around practices that exist outside the conventional realm of females and femininity, such as computing. . . . One of the things that's difficult for girls is that you can't use a computer for very long without getting some kind of error. When girls encounter that they start to think, "I can't do it" and they back off. The boys tend to be more confident and just keep plowing ahead (Kearny, 2006, p. 246).

The stories told by girl participants in San Andres Zautla ground these ideas. These girls talked about becoming frustrated with the technology (with issues ranging from computer and video issues to the irregular internet signal) and deciding to give up on media projects as a result of the frustration. Creating positive technical experiences, and equipping youth with the skills to face technical issues is key in order to empower youth, especially girls, to use media to affect change. The more skilled volunteer who was also an educator in Santa Lucia understood this, and placed heavy emphasis on technical problem solving. AMIGOS also places focus on this piece by providing a volunteer manual thick with technical support and ideas and lesson plans on how to teach technology.

International Leadership and Exchange

Though the media projects may at times be murky, youth involved from Mexico and the U.S. consistently expressed they felt they had improved their leadership skills through participation in this project. Their leadership development is evident in the ways that the youth talk about their experiences and lessons learned, referring to having learned "to work in groups" (focus group, Santa Lucia) or to have "learned to communicate with people very different from myself" (focus group, Zautla). This is evident in the American volunteers' experiences when they talk about new abilities to lead projects and to work in cross-cultural environments. Parents, community leaders and teachers bear witness to the process of leadership development when they talk about the ability of youth to participate in community-wide affairs (like the youth in Santa Lucia who made the podcasts).

These capacities (like the ability to communicate with people who are different than oneself, the ability to work in groups, and to lead community projects) are very relevant in terms of creating strong, caring youth leaders—a major goal of the AMIGOS program. Friere's ideas on critical consciousness point to these abilities as integral qualities for those who wish to inspire social change. Similarly, educational theorist Nel Noddings reinforces the idea of being able to care for one's own community. This happens in the AMIGOS project in Oaxaca in three ways: through the creation of media, through intergenerational community service projects, and through the living situation, in which volunteers live with a family spending all their time in the community when they are not teaching media. Each of these factors was successful to varying degrees. These three components

create many intimate relationships that influence the leadership of the volunteers and local youth involved in the project. Friere and Noddings both refer to the importance of time spent together between educator and learner that is informal. The informal time spent together creates relationships where there is a shared ethic of caring. This makes possible community service projects as well as in depth media projects that without these informal relationships would not have been possible.

The informal relationships are important in education because they create what Avishai Margalit, a philosopher of memory, refers to as ethical communities. Ethical communities are communities built upon relationships that are “thick”: like family, close friends, and generally people located spatially close to each other. There is a deep sense of caring in these communities, and this sense of caring has the potential to provoke action for social change and progress. Moral communities, on the other hand, are built on wider ideological understandings of others and the perception of what we “should” do or are responsible to as human beings. In the AMIGOS setting, a volunteer and community might enter into the relationship for moral reasons, but the construction of thick ethical relationships is what creates the deep relationships and friendships that community members and volunteers have held central to their leadership and international understanding abilities that AMIGOS fostered.

These informal relationships, the living situation and the reality that the volunteers live in the community for 2 months without leaving greatly impacts the formation of an ethical community and a heightened international understanding. Noddings pushes the idea of international understanding further, theorizing that care is at the center of these relationships and that it is necessary to foster a sense of care about others different from oneself in order to have any hope in creating a peaceful world. There are many traces of this care fostered in the informal environment in the community where the volunteers spent much of their time: parents refer to the volunteers as their sons and daughters, children talk about how much they look up to them, youth express how dearly they miss them. Likewise, the volunteers express similar sentiments about their host families and friends. These deep relationships were key in fostering international respect and understanding that in turn facilitated the leadership development of the youth involved from Mexico and from the States.

Critical Thinking

In the classroom, the youth express that they learned to communicate with people different from themselves. Some say they were inspired to travel the world after working with the volunteers. Many youth also are able to talk critically about opinions they held about Americans and American lifestyle prior to knowing the volunteers. They talk about the disconnect between media representations of American life and what they learned about American life from the volunteers. While this is not a topic addressed in the Digital Culture project, this is a topic that

came up again and again in conversations with the youth. Their level of familiarity with American culture as communicated through the mass media suggests that they are engulfed in media saturated culture, though in different ways than their American counterparts.

In the discourse of media literacy, the concept of critical “refers to the recognition that visual and electronic messages are constructed texts that present particular, distinctive points of view as a result of the economic, political, and social contexts in which they circulate” (Hobbs, *Reconceptualizing Media Literacy for the Digital Age*, 2006, p. 18). In the case mentioned above, youth are indeed recognizing the construction of mediated communication and the presentation of distinctive points of view as related to relations of power. However, within discourses of critical literacy, the term critical “emphasizes that identity and power relations are always part of the process of composing and interpreting texts, and that these processes occur in a social-culturally historically-bound framework. . . . critical literacy . . . must be understood as an embodiment of social and political relationships” (Hobbs, *Reconceptualizing Media Literacy for the Digital Age*, 2006, p. 19). AMIGOS makes an effort at facilitating both types of critical awareness. The project locates itself in the intersections of community development, youth leadership, and international exchange so there is an inherent embodiment of political awareness and identity as bound by social and historical frameworks.

The ability to critically analyze the media in one’s own surroundings is an important part of media literacy as Hobbs has suggested. In order to make change through media, youth need to be able to understand the way that media messages are constructed. The youth in Santa Lucia and San Andres Zautla were able to begin to think about the construction of media messages about American youth when they became friends with the volunteers and discovered that the media messages about the American youth were skewed compared to the actual lives of the volunteers. The AMIGOS handover report from 2007 (a document the Project Director prepares at the conclusion of the project including evaluations, suggestions for the future, and important events from the summer) listed lessons learned by volunteers. One of the lessons learned was that poor, rural Mexican people are very different than the way the media portrays poor, rural Mexican people. Learning to evaluate media messages in this way is a key aspect of media literacy. AMIGOS may consider introducing volunteers and youth to the vocabulary necessary to talk about media messages critically.

The mediums used in the Digital Culture project, including blogs and participating in social networks in order to share media pieces, could also be fruitful sites for fostering critical learning because of their very structure. Hobbs points to this idea through her writing about the massive presence of youth in the blogosphere, and because this medium invites collaboration and commentary on one another’s work. The built-in ability to comment on the work of others in the blog setting is critical:

blogs can support the development of critical analysis skills, as students ask questions about authors' motives and purposes or examine the rhetorical and visual construction techniques which may be used to make a blog attractive or enhance its readability. (Hobbs, *Multiple Visions of Multimedia Literacy: Emerging Areas of Synthesis*, 2006, p. 103)

Creating moments in which young people can upload media work to blogs, and work on on-going projects by brainstorming, journaling, and collecting images both from their own media work and the internet on blogs not only addresses issues of the digital divide and visual inclusion that the Digital Culture project seeks to address, but also could facilitate a larger conversation between youth working on similar projects. In blogs worked on by youth in Santa Lucia, ideas were shared and images and video were posted by youth in response to projects by their classmates. The youth not only engaged in practices of reading and writing but also in sharing opinions and ideas about each others work and adding to a collection of images and video that the youth in the end drew from in creating their final projects. This is an example of how new media technology can facilitate critical literacy and learning through its structure as opposed to through the content generated or addressed.

Fostering Community Development

The AMIGOS mission statement states its programs will foster community development. The vision is that community development is youth led and accomplished through the initiative of small scale, very sustainable projects that, more than anything, ignite a spark in the youth to continue sustaining and inventing projects even after the AMIGOS program ends. In many ways, this vision parallels Freire's ideas about educating for critical consciousness, which entails teaching the skills and capacities necessary for youth to be able to create change.

This segment of the mission plays out in interesting ways in this project. The structure and title of the project suggests that ideally youth would learn to affect processes of change through media. This would entail that the volunteers and youth be able to effectively connect media production to community processes of change. While they were able to do community service projects that were inter-generational and effective in San Andres Zautla, there was no incorporation of media (beyond photographing the event) into the project. This is an example of using media in a community project, but it is not an example of creating change *through* media making, media showing, or media education. Likewise, media was not used to strengthen or interrogate community service projects in Santa Lucia. However, the youth in Santa Lucia were later able to use their newly learned media skills to create change through media. Working with a parents group, they created podcasts that were broadcast over community radio about the importance of allowing children to speak the indigenous language in school. Small-scale community development projects, like the one youth in Santa Lucia did post-

AMIGOS, would enhance this part of the mission. It is important to note that this example is an incredible success in terms of creating sustainable change through media because it happened after the volunteers left; it indicates strong ownership over the media project and leadership by the youth. AMIGOS often makes three-year-commitments to communities, and this long-term commitment is an excellent starting point to begin to really work on community development issues that are relevant in the lives of youth. AMIGOS volunteers can continue to provide skill support so that youth are able to engage in media activism.

The skills youth learned about how to use media and technology contributed to community development. This is especially true in the case of the youth who used their media skills to create podcasts in order to involve other communities in the struggle to allow children to continue to speak the indigenous language in school. These media skills are assets that can be mobilized in many different ways.

Because of the short time AMIGOS programs are active in communities, AMIGOS should consider integrating media in ways that are familiar to the organizations and its partners. All Community Based Initiatives in Digital Culture communities should be documented with media. Youth should reflect on the process through media, and use media to create a library of ideas and reflections that can be referred to in the future. Other community members can be interviewed by youth about the community wide project, and the information stored in multi media formats. This also makes the information accessible in indigenous languages that are not written and to those who cannot read or write. Critical thought and conversation about the community service project could reinforce Noddings' ideas about caring for the community and for others, and lead to Freire's critical consciousness.

This kind of project might take on the form of a community assets map, something AMIGOS encourages frequently in communities. The map could be digital in nature, and could map community assets, people, and ideas. It could include reflections on community projects, and how community projects were organized, including funding sources, community leaders, and the planning process. AMIGOS as an organization is very familiar with the idea of community asset mapping, and so moving this idea into the Digital Culture project realm could be a catalyst for connecting media projects and community service more concretely. Additionally, different communities participating in Digital Culture could come together to share these community service project maps with each other, and as such have a digital guide to how another community leveraged media tools complete a project.

Media Pedagogy

Media Education scholar Renee Hobbs identifies the two pillars of media education pedagogy to be “the process of inquiry, with critical questions guiding the

process of message analysis” (Hobbs, *Multiple Visions of Multimedia Literacy: Emerging Areas of Synthesis*, 2006, p. 18) and

situated action learning, based on the work of Freire and Macedo which emphasized the cycle of awareness, analysis reflection, action and experience in a community context that is responsive to the needs of individuals, particularly as they relate to social inequalities and political injustices. (Hobbs, *Multiple Visions of Multimedia Literacy: Emerging Areas of Synthesis*, 2006, p. 18)

Hobbs ideas about media pedagogy clarify the ways in which the AMIGOS Oaxaca project does and does not align with common media pedagogy practices. AMIGOS attempts to focus on the process of inquiry into cultural practices by constructing a situation in which AMIGOS volunteers facilitate media making about cultural issues. In order to do so, the youth and volunteers must go through a community-based process during which they ask questions about their own lives and culture to those around them. While critical questions may guide the process in some cases, critical questioning is not built into the process. However, situated action learning is insofar as the work is done in a community context and youth are guided to make videos about indigenous culture by community leaders and elders. In this way, it is a model responsive to the needs of both the youth asking the questions and the elders answering them. Social inequities and political injustices are at times addressed, though it is perhaps through the gaining of these skills that local youth are, as a result, able to use media tools to deal with social inequity and political injustice. This is exactly what happened in the case of Santa Lucia, where the youth used the information literacy they gained as a result of the AMIGOS program in order to engage in issues related to political injustice.

AMIGOS volunteers are trained in many pedagogical issues. They receive significant training on leadership, cultural sensitivity, working with peers and children, and other similar topics. Much of their training follows a Freirian construct in terms of teaching in order to inspire a sense of wonder and relating to people on a personal level in order to inspire curiosity. AMIGOS training often addresses deep theoretical issues about power, social change, international constructs and relationships, and youth exchange with volunteers. AMIGOS volunteers, though not given the language, often engage in praxis where they are encouraged to allow these theoretical concerns to reflect in their local work. There is a sense among AMIGOS volunteers and AMIGOS project staff of a shared vision of justice and social change. While AMIGOS volunteers are not taught this language, many learn in AMIGOS training about progressive educational practices and about community education and organizing efforts. They then apply these lessons in their work in the communities in Latin America.

AMIGOS in general and all the volunteers I interviewed certainly conceive of the volunteers and local youth as partners in learning. AMIGOS does not construct either as having more knowledge and actively trains volunteers in finding partners, mentors, and experts in the community in which they work (Moore,

2007). The commitment to this kind of pedagogy is reflected in Kearney's *Girls Make Media* book, where she discusses the importance of media educators working within a feminist pedagogy. They perceive themselves as partners in learning as opposed to teachers and students working within a hierarchy, an approach largely taken up by AMIGOS volunteers and Project Staff. This approach to educating allowed the AMIGOS volunteers to develop deep friendships with the youth. It also opened up the possibility of working across political lines, and in Zautla the friendships they developed crossed deeply divided political groups. This resulted in the youth from several of the groups coming together and becoming friends. Many adults in the community praised this, and commented that the youth modeled these relationships after the volunteers, who became friends with people of all political backgrounds.

These deep relationships, based in friendship and mutual respect, are what make Goldfarb's ideas about peer-to-peer learning so successful, at least in terms of creating international understanding. Youth and volunteers are expected to make videos that document culture, using knowledge about digital media that the volunteers have and knowledge about local culture that the local youth have. They must educate each other about their respective bodies of knowledge in order for the project to work. Pedagogically, this level of respect and friendship allows for student and teacher to have interchangeable and fluid roles.

Because the youth are using media and technology innovatively, they escape many of the issues addressed by educators working with media and technology in the classroom. Media education theorists Mary Bryson, Suzanne de Castell, and Jennifer Jenson identify one of the main issues erupting in technology based pedagogy in schools is the misconception that in order for technology to work in the classroom teachers must gain a high level of comfort with technology. Media and technology are then simply used to remediate bounded notions about schooling in new formats- placing information once held in analogue formats onto the network. This way of using technology for education does not allow for creativity and intellectual challenge when working with new media and technology because it fails to open space to experiment with how young people might create new learning experiences through media that are different than analogue learning experiences (Bryson, de Castells, Jenson). When youth work in a peer to peer format, especially one like AMIGOS that does not have significant adult supervision and in which youth have to define how, why, and what they will do with the technologies, there is extreme potential creativity and intellectual challenge. The creativity and intellectual challenge may occur in the most playful of senses, yet playful encounters allow young people to embody technology for daily use and importantly, playful encounters with technology assume nothing about how the technology will be used or what the expectations for a successful project are. Perhaps on a longer term scale, and with some further youth training or community leadership, programs like AMIGOS Digital Culture could begin to explore some innovative and emerging ways of learning with new media.

The ability to situate the learning about culture through media historically was key in the San Andres Zautla project. The volunteers had deep relationships with their host family, who were uniquely knowledgeable and involved in cultural preservation and learning. Because of the relationship with the host mom, Lidia and her son, they were able to facilitate classes about the history of culture. This worked because the youth interviewed the elderly about stories and “life before” and once their curiosity was piqued these two experts on indigenous Oaxacan culture were able to situate the learning in a larger context. In many ways, this worked because there is such a drive in the community to resurrect indigenous traditions and culture before it is completely lost.

In this way, pedagogy was shaped by the time and cultural movement of the community, and largely influenced by those in the community who were prominent leaders. This was very effective in creating long-term community partnerships, and also in creating a multigenerational project. This is important in a social justice context because it makes the project significantly more sustainable and inclusive. This project was instrumental in creating long term “development” or social change, and even creating youth leaders who will continue to lead into the future depends on sustainable projects that last more than just a summer. In this community, AMIGOS did a solid job of integrating community leaders into the project to ensure this would happen.

Conclusions

Youth media is a powerful mechanism through which young people from all over the world can communicate and interrogate issues and themes from within youth culture. Youth media programs can use the assets brought to the program by youth who exist in a saturated media ecology, and these skills can be used in peer-to-peer models, especially where exposure to media and technologies is uneven. Because media technologies are often used in informal communication, the youth to youth model might allow for Oaxacan youth to acclimate to new media technologies through play and informal use, and in some cases the right environment could direct this informal knowledge into positive channels of social change. However, youth would benefit from formal media training so that their media projects effectively communicate stories. The emphasis in learning should be on the process as opposed to the product. Even so, in order to create positive and empowering experiences for youth that can lead to the ability to affect change by using new media technologies, youth need to understand media production and storytelling techniques. Formal training in the craft of media production facilitates learning how to use these technologies in order to move others to action. These are important skills for youth internationally.

Youth media organizations and programs must account for the diverse media knowledge and media environments of their youth. Especially when youth media organizations rely on a peer to peer education model, it can be easy to overlook

the deep connection between knowing how to use new media and technology and the social environment, as has happened to many AMIGOS volunteers who wonder *what* exactly to do with new media technologies once outside their own media environment. Even so, peer-to-peer models hold endless potential insofar as they allow youth to create a network of knowledge through new media in environments that are, like most AMIGOS communities, less saturated with new media and virtual communication forms. Allowing diverse young people to create this network of knowledge at the small community level is powerful especially working in audio, video, and photographic formats because these ways of recording knowledge are accessible to a wider range of individuals than is written knowledge. Many AMIGOS programs include people who do not read and write: this is a new way of enabling knowledge production so that cultural histories can be stored in widely accessible formats.

The informal learning and play that youth in the AMIGOS program do engage in even without sharp media production skills is powerful. It is powerful because media knowledge and the ability to access knowledge through media exists as a habit, integrated into daily life. Through play, AMIGOS volunteers and other peer educators in media programs can help youth without as consistent access to media technologies to learn to use media technologies to interact with each other and the world on a daily basis. The result may be that the process and/or the media production seem uncritical or that it lacking motive and goals, however as these skills become habitual, they will also become integrated into efforts to affect social change. In this way, AMIGOS volunteers and youth educators can support playful acquisition of media skills that perhaps can be leveraged through concerted efforts by community leaders and educators to facilitate social change. This is exactly what happened in Santa Lucia, when the youth used the skills they learned in the summer to make podcasts that were broadcast on indigenous and community radio about the right to use indigenous language in schools. AMIGOS and other peer-to-peer youth media organizations might partner with community education groups and community leaders in order to facilitate the use of media skills for social change in a sustainable manner.

Through playful inquiry into media technologies that is not bound by traditional educational methodology, diverse youth in a supportive peer-to-peer environment can transform the way they access the world. Once they are able to access the world and information through new media, youth enter into the virtually connected network of knowledge which is not bound by geography. Donna Haraway's essay titled "Cyborg Manifesto" addresses this power- one that can be accessed by those previously decentered from knowledge making because new media environments and technologies offer the possibility to create environments with new relations of power and emergent subjectivities. Because youth in the AMIGOS program and in other similar programs are removed from their media environments and given new media tools to create with, they might be able to interact in new ways with Haraway's new subjectivities- they are assigning mean-

ing to and using new media technologies in ways that are unfamiliar to them and that they collectively assign. By engaging in the creation of knowledge, previously disempowered youth can come together to interrogate the world and imagine a better world which they might enact through media. By doing so, youth in international peer to peer media education programs might also begin to discover the “novelty, unprecedented innovation, intellectual challenge, ideological dissent” that Bryson, deCastell, and Jensen find so lacking in the mainstream education’s insistence on making teachers comfortable with technology in order to facilitate media education.

AMIGOS is a unique and powerful organization that has achieved much in terms of giving young people from throughout the Americas tremendous amounts of responsibility. By doing so, they have created young leaders in many countries in Latin America and also in the states. They have facilitated international understanding for thousands of people since AMIGOS began in the sixties, and as we move into a digital age AMIGOS continues to provide empowering programs for youth in the Americas. There are many challenges met by the rural communities AMIGOS works in, and to varying degrees communities have more and more access to technology and media. AMIGOS has met this development with the Digital Culture project in Oaxaca. The Digital Culture project is the only youth media project I am aware of that depends entirely on leadership from youth to shape and carry out the project. This has tremendous potential, especially because youth are able to engage with knowledge in new media formats on the Digital Culture project. I am hopeful that as the project progresses, and as new media continues to become a presence on AMIGOS projects throughout Latin America, that AMIGOS will continue to shift its practices and programs to address the changing interests and passions of the communities, and especially, the young people of the Americas.

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