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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. Video production with disadvantaged youth can also play a role of art therapy, as 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 brought by one video project.

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

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.[1] The need to develop collaboration skills is emphasized in Common Core State Standards, 21st Century Skills initiative and Civic Skills classes. However, 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 disadvantaged or at-risk students – "young people whose potential for becoming responsible and productive adults is limited by challenges within the ecology of their lives."[2] Students belonging to this important population, also referred to as underserved, may have problems collaborating, especially with adults and under their guidance – because of their mistrust of authority figures.[3]

Historically schools have not been a place where collaboration skills are acquired, because of the prevailing emphasis on individual achievement.[4] Bricker described this situation as unfortunate and schools that focus on individualism as "morally undesirable places,"[5] where students fail to learn social virtues necessary for civic engagement. Nowadays this situation is gradually changing, and many educators help children develop social skills, such as communication, collaboration, empathy, and civic engagement.[6] More emphasis is being put on "multiple intelligences" that include various abilities necessary for being an engaged citizen and a complete person.[7]

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 the media by deconstructing them, and creating their own media messages to express their voices and to understand their role in the democratic society.[8] Participation in media production is especially

[1] "21st Century Skills," accessed on February 23, 2014, http://www.imls.gov/about/21st_century_skills_list.aspx

[2] J. Jeffries McWhirter, Benedict T. McWhirter, Ellen Hawley McWhirter and Robert J. McWhirter, *At Risk Youth: A Comprehensive Response*, (Belmont: Brooks/Cole, 2013), xiii.

[3] Steven Goodman, *Teaching Youth Media: A Critical Guide to Literacy, Video Production, and Social Change* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003).

[4] David C. Bricker, *Classroom Life as Civic Education: Individual Achievement and Student Cooperation in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1989).

[5] Ibid., 97.

[6] David Buckingham, *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture* (Malden: Polity, 2003).

[7] Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons* (New York: BasicBooks, 2006).

[8] Renee Hobbs, "The Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement," *Journal of Communication* 48, no.1 (1998): 16-23.

important for media literacy education, as it serves several functions. It helps youth express their voices,[9] 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.).[10] Through media production students acquire media and digital literacy that is still often ignored in traditional classrooms, although it is crucial for young people's lives in the twenty-first century. Media production is also a useful strategy of increasing students' motivation to learn.[11]

A number of scholars have explored complex human phenomenon of collaboration in the area of education[12] [13] [14] and special education[15]. Talking about democracy as a form of collaboration, Chavez and Soep[16] 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. Creating video messages including documentaries, interviews, and music videos is an inherently collaborative process, because a team of several people is necessary to create even a short video. The theme of civic engagement is prominent in studies of youth video production by Stack[17] and Goodman.[18] For instance, Stack 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 analyzes the effectiveness of media production with at-risk youth 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 learning process. 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[19] [20] [21] and what it looks like in the context of video production in an educational setting[22] [23], little is still known about the collaborative competencies of at-risk youth in relation to video production and media literacy.

One particularly disadvantaged group of children in the United States is youth growing in the foster care system.[24] Removed from their homes by the states, children often live in an atmosphere of stress and mistrust, sometimes 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[25] [26] [27]. Collaboration in media production has been shown to help disadvantaged teenagers articulate their identity and regain the sense of control over their

[9] Nicole R. Fleetwood, "Authenticating Practices: Producing Realness, Performing Youth," in Y*outhscapes: The Popular, the National, the Global*, eds. Sunaina Maira and Elizabeth Soep, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 155–172.

[10] Goodman, *Teaching Youth Media*.

[11] Hiller A. Spires, Lisa G. Hervey, Gwynn Morris and Catherine Stelpflug, "Energizing Project-Based Inquiry: Middle-Grade Students Read, Write, and Create Videos," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 55, no.6 (2012): 483–493.

[12] Vivian Chavez and Elizabeth Soep, "Youth Radio and the Pedagogy of Collegiality," *Harvard Educational Review* 75, no.4 (2005): 409-434.

[13] Linda A. Camino, "Youth-Adult Partnerships: Entering New Territory in Community Work and Research," *Applied Developmental Science* 4, no. 1 (2000): 11-20.

[14] Michelle Stack, "Video Production and Youth-Educator Collaboration: Openings and Dilemmas," *McGill Journal of Education* 44, no. 2 (2009): 299-318.

[15] Goodman, *Teaching Youth Media*.

[16] Chavez and Soep, "Youth Radio and the Pedagogy of Collegiality."

[17] Stack, "Video Production and Youth-Educator Collaboration."

[18] Goodman, *Teaching Youth Media*.

[19] Dee J. Appley and Alvin E. Winder, "An Evolving Definition of Collaboration and Some Implications for the World of Work," *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 13, no. 3 (1977), 279-91.

[20] Jeremy Roschelle, "Learning by Collaborating: Convergent Conceptual Change. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences* 2, no. 3 (1992), 235-76.

[21] Elizabeth Soep, "Critique: Assessment and the Production of Learning," *Teachers College Record* 108, no. 4 (2006), 748-77.

[22] Goodman, *Teaching Youth Media*.

[23] Fleetwood, "Authenticating Practices: Producing Realness, Performing Youth."

[24] Kathleen K. Reardon and Christopher T. Noblet, *Childhood Denied: Ending the Nightmare of Child Abuse and Neglect* (Washington, DC: Sage 2009).

[25] Anne McIntyre and Thomas Y. Keesler, "Psychological Disorders Among Foster Children," *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology* 15, no. 4 (1986): 297-303.

[26] June M. Clausen, John Landsverk, William Ganger, David Chadwick and Alan Litrownick, "Mental Health Problems of Children in Foster Care," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 7, no. 3 (1998): 283-96.

[27] Bonnie T. Zima, Regina Bussing, Stephanny Freeman, Xiaowei Yang, Thomas R. Belin and Steven R. Forness, "Behavior Problems, Academic Skill Delays and School Failure among School-Aged Children in Foster Care: Their Relationship to Placement Characteristics," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 9, no. 1 (2000): 87-103.

life.[28] However, video production has another important characteristic that may be especially relevant in case of foster youth. Producing videos may be a form of art therapy and an exercise of meaning-making; as such, it may be a transformative experience that enables some students to come to terms with traumatizing pasts.[29] [30]

Media production programs around the world help underserved youth "to comment on their world, share ideas, and take action on the social issues that are important to them."[31] Children who are used to not being listened to and cared about become empowered by telling their stories and influencing the way others see the world they live in.[32] According to Lawrence-Lightfoot, "[e]mpowerment refers to the opportunities a person has for autonomy, responsibility, choice, and authority."[33] By creating videos, at-risk youth are not only able to reflect on their life situations, but also to take responsibility for 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 do children from marginalized populations experience collaborative movie making? 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 First Star Academy, a program offered 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. To answer my questions, I observed collaboration, conflict and creativity during the process of video production in the media literacy classroom.

Describing Creative Process: Portraiture

To construct the narrative of my study I used portraiture, a qualitative methodology developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot.[34] Combining features of ethnography and case study with principles of artistic expression, portraiture offers unique opportunities for capturing the complexity of human experience. In her scholarly work, Lawrence-Lightfoot explains how, by blending aesthetics and empiricism, portraiture helps scholars to describe the subtlety of social interactions. Despite the introduction of aesthetics into the process of academic reasoning, portraiture remains scientifically rigorous – but not in a positivistic sense. A researcher using portraiture does not deny her subjectivity. Instead, she embraces it in order to create descriptions that would allow the reader to empathize with research subjects, and get a glimpse into unique universes of their lives.

The ability to describe social reality in its complexity, and to accept the unattainability of the big "T" truth about the world are the key strengths of the qualitative researcher.[35] Admitting her positionality and the situatedness of her voice, she can overcome the rigidity of the positivist paradigm. In the words of Diaz, "an author can never be truly objective… nor can the descriptions [of] events, people, places, and situations be entirely 'true', concretely factual, or objectively representative."[36] Qualitative researchers like Diaz and Lawrence-Lightfoot do not pretend that they can remove themselves from the study; instead, they celebrate their subjectivity through evocative and compelling writing.

According to Hackmann, "[p]ortraiture differs from traditional forms of qualitative research because the

[28] Goodman, *Teaching Youth Media*.

[29] Cathy A. Malchiodi, *Breaking the Silence: Art Therapy with Children from Violent Homes* (Bristol: Brunner/Mazel,1997)

[30] Cathy A. Malchiodi and Bruce Perry, *Creative Interventions with Traumatized Children* (New York: Guilford Press, 2008).

[31] Michelle Mann, "Helping Students Express their Passion," *Learning & Leading with Technology* 38, no. 6, (2011): 10-15.

[32] Marcelle Haddix and Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, "Cultivating Digital and Popular Literacies as Empowering and Emancipatory Acts Among Urban Youth," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 56, no. 3 (2012): 189-192.

[33] Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, "On Goodness in Schools: Themes of Empowerment," *Peabody Journal of Education* 63, no. 3, (1986): 9-28, 9.

[34] Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, J. Hoffman, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

[35] Sharlene N. Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy, *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (Washington: Sage, 2011).

[36] Joseph D. Diaz, "Blood Money: Life, Death and Plasma on the Las Vegas Strip," *Electronic Journal of Sociology* 4, no. 2, accessed on February 13, 2014, http://www.sociology.org/content/vol004.002/diaz.html

investigator 's voice purposely is woven into the written document, called a portrait, which is created as a result of the researcher's interactions with the actors in the research setting."[37] Not surprisingly, the literary nature of portraiture has drawn some criticism especially from scholars in the social sciences[38] [39] who are concerned about the perceived lack of intensity in data analysis, and the problems of generalizability. However, several authors have successfully used portraiture to enlighten educational research.[40] [41] [42] Hackmann found that at least 40 studies within educational settings have been conducted using this research method. For example, Chapman combined portraiture with critical race theory to help educators better understand the interactions between teachers and students of color,[43] and to explore the issue of voice in a racially diverse urban classroom.[44] Schendel used portraiture to illuminate positive aspects of experiences that struggling readers have in school.[45] Mages used portraiture to illustrate "how an inner-city educational drama organization can provide a rich context for learning and development, while fostering interpersonal skills and communicative abilities."[46]

These and other researchers who use portraiture praise its unique ability to capture experiences from a multiplicity of perspectives and help the reader to come closer to understanding of explored phenomena. As for the perceived disadvantages, scholars note that some of them can be overcome by the depth of data collection and triangulation. Critics should also remember that no research method is perfect. That is why exploring any phenomenon we must use a variety of methods, and conduct a variety of studies from different angles.

Portraiture's value also lies in its ability to present findings in a compelling, clear, "user-friendly" way. Lawrence-Lightfoot emphasized that as she was creating portraiture her goal was to bring research findings to readers outside of the academy.[47] Accessible language of portraiture makes it a perfect methodology for scholars who want to contribute to social change.

Portraiture was appropriate for my project for several reasons. First, Lawrence-Lightfoot showed this method's usefulness for documenting the learning process and the culture of schools.[48] 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, portraiture helped me capture the complexity of interactions that took place during the messy process of media production.

In science, "one way of seeing is another way of not seeing".[49] Choosing a research method always involves a trade-off. While lacking objectivity and generalizability of quantitative methods, portraiture and other art-based methods[50] offer an opportunity to register complexities that even more traditional qualitative researchers might fail to notice.

Context of the Study: First Star Academy

The current paper is a result of 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

[37] Donald G. Hackmann, "Using Portraiture in Educational Leadership Research," *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 5, no. 1, (2002): 51-60, 52.

[38] Fenwick W. English, "A Critical Appraisal of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's Portraiture as a Method of Educational Research," *Educational Researcher* 29, no. 7, 21–26.

[39] Sharan B. Merriam, Case Study Research in Education: A Qualitative Approach. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988).

[40] Hackmann, "Using Portraiture in Educational Leadership Research."

[41] Margaret D. LeCompte, "Research Roles," in *Researcher Roles and Research Partnerships*, eds. Margaret D. LeCompte, Jean J. Schensul, Margaret R. Weeks, and Merrill Singer, (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1999), 1–83.

[42] Stephen Marble, "Narrative Visions of Schooling," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 13, no. 1, (1997): 55-64.

[43] Thandeka K. Chapman, "Interrogating Classroom Relationships and Events: Using Portraiture and Critical Race Theory in Education Research," *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 3 (2007), 156-62.

[44] Thandeka K. Chapman, "Expressions of Voice in Portraiture," *Qualitative Inquiry* 11, no. 1 (2005), 27-51.

[45] Roland K. Schendel, "Voices of Striving Elementary Readers: An Exploration of the Enhancement of Struggling Reader Research through Portraiture Methodology," Doctoral Dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2009.

[46] Wendy K. Mages, "Urban Improv: A Portrait of an Educational Drama Organization," *Youth Theater Journal*, 18 (2007): 30-44.

[47] Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture*.

[48] Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, *The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

[49] Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, 38.

[50] Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor and Richard Siegesmund, *Arts-Based Research in Education: Foundations for Practice*, (New York: Routledge, 2008).

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.[51] [52]

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.

In 2012 twenty-two foster adolescents aged 14-16 came to First Star Academy to study English, math, art and two media literacy courses: Videography and Social Networks, taught by instructors from Harrington School of Communication and Media at the University of Rhode Island. Out of the twenty-two students, nineteen were entering 9th grade in the fall, two were entering 10th grade and one was entering 8th grade. Out of the twenty-two students, two left the academy prior to the end because of behavioral issues.

Students were taking classes on campus, and most of the meetings for the media literacy classes took place at Curriculum Materials Library space of the campus library. The children were living in a fraternity house. During the three weeks of the program they had media literacy classes five days a week. While in the Social Networks course they learned how to use Internet responsibly, the Videography offered them an opportunity to engage in media production. Using Flip cameras and library computers they learned how to shoot videos and edit them. By the end of the summer program 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 more than thirty videos that were then shown at the final screening.

[51] Reardon and Noblet, *Childhood Denied*.

[52] Zima et al., "Behavior Problems, Academic Skill Delays and School Failure among School-Aged Children in Foster Care."

Collecting Data

According to Hackmann, "[p]ortraiture not only recognizes but also exploits the fact that the investigator's physical presence unalterably changes the cultural dynamics of the research environment."[53] During my observations, I played a role of a participant-observer. I was wearing several hats: researcher, co-instructor, and, in a way, students' friend. On the one hand, this multiplicity of roles created certain limitations: my feelings towards students made complete objectivity impossible, and my actions might have influenced what I was observing. However, according to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, in portraiture, researcher's involvement is an important element of the data collection and interpretation process. By entering participants' lives and engaging them in a dialogue the researcher can learn things that she would miss if she maintained the detached position of the complete observer.

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.

I was present in all Videography and Social Networks classes. The two courses were combined into eighteen sessions, or the total of 44.5 hours of instruction. I was conducting my observations not only during the whole length of the program, but also during organizational meetings prior to the students' arrival. As a result, my observations lasted 53.5 hours. During First Star staff meetings on campus and later in media literacy classes, I took hand-written notes on the fly.

While in the Videography class I observed students working on all three projects, I was particularly intrigued by the final assignment, because of the dynamics of conflict, collaboration and creativity that I witnessed. I tell about my choice in more detail in the following section.

Collaboration in the Learning Context

Collaboration was a burning issue during our classes. For the first two video projects the instructors

[53] Hackmann, "Using Portraiture in Educational Leadership Research," 53-54.

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 First Star 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. 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. For the last project the rules changed. The students could themselves decide with whom they wanted to 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.

For this paper I decided to focus on one particular group working on their final video. The team that I observed consisted of only two participants, two girls. I wanted to tell a story of conflict, collaboration and transformation that were triggered by the process of creative storytelling. I intentionally do not focus on the analysis of the video the girls produced. Halverson[54] showed that such analysis can help the researcher better understand identity exploration and positioning of young media producers. However, in this study I decided to focus on the process of media production, not its product because my goal was to discuss the dynamics of conflict and collaboration.

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 ensure anonymity.

Using Portraiture: Megan and Donna's Final Project

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.

Some moments of collaboration, however, were extraordinary. These were unexpected transformations that happened when unleashed creativity broke negative patterns and helped children 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 built relationships with a group 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 First Star 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

[54] Erica R. Halverson, Film as Identity Exploration: A Multimodal Analysis of Youth Produced Films, *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 9 (2010), 2352-2378.

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 program, 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 a 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 dialogue 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.[55] 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

[55] Anna C. Gardano, "Creative Video Therapy with Early Adolescent Girls in Short-Term Treatment," *Journal of Child and Adolescent Group Therapy* 4, no. 2 (1994), 99-116.

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 dialogue for their characters. Having occupied the whole table at the Curriculum Materials Library, they were emotionally discussing the characters and interactions that those were supposed to have in the video. Then Megan accurately wrote down dialogue, 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 the 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, an inspirational contemporary hymn. Donna wanted the music to be louder than the actors' voices. Megan believed that the dialogue 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. Several First Star staff members and instructors had to serve as mediators between the girls, suggesting different options of solving the conflict until the middle ground was found. 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. Altogether, it took the girls about five hours of working in class to finish the final project.

Same Thursday, once everybody finished final projects, students showed their works to each other on the big screen. Each team stood in front of the class, introduced their video and answered questions that others asked. Megan and Donna seemed quite 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. There are eight characters: Megan (played by herself), her real parents (two First Star staff members), a teacher (the head librarian of Curriculum Materials Library), 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 to 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, and 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 several 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 liked the shots of the actors trying to stay serious so much, 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 with elements of art therapy helped Donna and Megan to come to terms with their pasts.

Becoming Complete

Theorizing about ways to teach oppressed populations, Freire developed a theory of emancipatory education. This theory explains how involving students on social and emotional levels impacts their performance in class.[56] During the final project at First Star Academy the high motivation to learn came from students' awareness that their voices can be heard. The children who participated in the Videography class in the summer of 2012 were offered an opportunity to help others understand their lives. Those who accepted the challenge and created meaningful narratives 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 Academy students had initially been distrustful and antagonistic, when three 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 first summer at First Star 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 these collaboration skills and use them most effectively.

According to Stack, "[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."[57] The collaboration between Megan and Donna was not always

[56] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2000 [1970]).

[57] Stack, *Video Production and Youth-Educator Collaboration*, 20.

perfect. They 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 do 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.[58] According to Robinson[59] schools kill creativity and hamper students' motivation for learning and discovery. Creativity and freedom are the best motivation and a guarantee for high performance and satisfaction.[60] 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 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.[61] 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 still remains in a way socially handicapped, this project helped her make an important step in the right direction, the direction of becoming complete.

[58] Ken Robinson, *Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative* (New York: John Wiley, 2001).

[59] Robinson, *Out of Our Minds*.

[60] Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth about what Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2011).

[61] John Fiske, *Media Matters: Race and Gender in the U. S. Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

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