Collaboration, Pedagogy, and Media: Short-Term Summer Programs Emphasize Project Based and Social Emotional Learning

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Abstract
Summer programs that experiment with combining media literacy and social-emotional learning can potentially affect students' academic performance. Based on a six-week program, working with rising eighth grade students in a low-income school district, this program allowed students to work on media projects while trying to develop stronger capacities of self-awareness, positive decision-making, and stronger relationship development. The article offers practitioners some insight on how to implement social and emotional learning into media literacy and media production classrooms.

Keywords: *social-emotional learning, media literacy, problem based learning, restorative pedagogy*

Summer education programs in the United States have been developed for the twenty-first century learner to help students utilize their critical literacies both on and offline (McCombs et al. 2011). Researchers found that inner-city youth who might have limited amounts of access to technology can benefit significantly from school and afterschool programs that involve using digital media (Derry et al. 2010). Such programs can combat summer learning loss; studies suggest that students who are engaged in programs over the summer can increase their academic performance (Cooper et al. 1996; McCombs et al. 2011). Summer programs for media literacy require specific pedagogical models that emphasize collaboration and understanding. For students who are having trouble acclimating to a school because their native language is not English, this can pose a challenge. Studies of youth media history shows that students creating media is sometimes perceived as being focused on the technical aspects of media production, having little focus on students conceptualizing, planning and collaborating to create an effective project (Hobbs and Moore, 2014). However, this paper explores how students from a diverse community could come together when the pedagogy, technology, and media production encouraged them to collaborate and become innovative thinkers. This experience can be explicated through the work of two students from the CF Digital Program.

CF Digital

CF Digital was the name given to six-week summer program designed for students developed by the Media Education Lab in partnership with VSA Arts Rhode Island and the Central Falls School District in Central Falls, Rhode Island, located near Providence. Central Falls is one of the poorest and most densely populated communities in New England with approximately 20,000 people living in a one-mile square area.

The U.S. Census notes that about 52% of the adults are high school graduates with a median household income of $27,000. Central Falls is a multiethnic community with about 60% Hispanic, 20% African-American and 20% Caucasian ethnicity.

Thirty students participated in the program. They included a mix of 13 boys and 17 girls between the ages of 12 - 13. We decided to divide the class into small working groups of roughly ten students in order to provide the most effective and individualized curriculum. We were initially required by the School District to teach students how to interact with media and produce their own projects. The summer program was a balance of academic and social opportunity; however, our class emphasized academics and collaboration. Fortunately, we received a grant of $20,000 from Hasbro, Inc. to use for equipment such as ten laptops, six video cameras, lighting, microphones, and headphones. Prior to receiving the grant, the Calcutt Middle School had limited resources aside from desktop computers, which would be used for the course. The media literacy summer program had three instructors for the six-week long program. During this time, we had approximately 20 contact hours with students each week. One instructor was a high school English teacher, the second a communication studies graduate student, and I am currently an undergraduate in Literature with limited teaching experience.

My instruction varied from the curriculum we had worked on together, although each curriculum had value in itself. The curriculum created between us three instructors focused on hip-hop culture, each day focused around a central question such as how can hip hop have a positive impact on your community? That includes not only hip hop music, but also break dancing, DJ'ing, and graffiti, all artistic frames of the hip hop medium. We wanted to use media literacy projects such as recorded debates, documentaries, and music videos to hone in on the popular culture we wrongly assumed students would be infatuated by. Instead of deciding for our students, I discovered by creating a democratic sphere within the classroom, students became intrinsically motivated in media literacy education and social-emotional projects. My objective was to *listen* to our students, and to explore media projects to encourage students' collaboration while placing value upon their intellectual and social capacities. Thus, my lesson plans—as demonstrated by two examples in this paper—created opportunities to focus on social integration in the classroom. There were opportunities for students to work on their media projects with peers, to present their work to small and large audiences, and to reflect on that work as a class, demonstrating a competency that I did not witness within the first few weeks of the program. The curriculum for CF Digital emphasized collaboration, insight, and reflection. At the beginning of the program, we gathered information using a questionnaire for the students to tell us about how much prior experience they had with media equipment and production. Many of the students revealed that they had no experience with media production; others suggested that they had done some prior work on Garageband and FinalCutPro10. Our lesson plans were scaffolding opportunities, starting with a focus on developing student collaboration and resulting in the production of media projects.

Findings

In the section that follows, two narrative stories represent students from the program. Jocelyn struggled to gain peer acceptance as she developed media production skills, while Josh was engaged in music video production. In describing both these cases, I acknowledge and reflect upon my own education as a novice instructor learning to engage in media literacy and production activities with urban teenagers.

Jocelyn's Story. Engaging in our digital literacy program appeared to be challenging for students who came into the classroom as English Language Learners. Jocelyn was born in Cape Verde; and since she was accustomed to speaking her native language at home, it was challenging for her to communicate in English with others in class. Jocelyn was accustomed to her native language, and thus found it troubling to think of words in English. Her peers harassed her because she had trouble comprehending words and using them in conversation,

and in return Jocelyn would send slurs back to them, and the cycle of harassment would continue. Another instructor had sent Jocelyn to my group as the result of arguing with students in her first group.

When she originally joined us, I assumed that she did not have an inherent desire to collaborate. Being cognizant of her lack of desire to interact with peers, I did not want to shut her away from the class because I understood this as being counterproductive from a pedagogical perspective. Shutting her away from opportunities with peers would likely cause her to be more withdrawn from the class. Instead, her initial interactions with peers inspired me to design an activity for the entire class that would encourage her to collaborate (Kohn 1986).

Jocelyn and her classmates were asked to create an "I Am" poster, which expressed their passions and familial roles on the front. On the back, I asked the class to write "This Is What You Want Me to Be." In this section, the students were asked to write all of the hobbies, passions, careers, and dreams they were suggested to pursue by teachers and adults in their lives that were not exactly the student's first priority. This project was generally used to create a transformative moment for students, causing them to reflect upon each other's cultures while they interacted in the classroom. The objective was that when students had time to express their voice through their posters, it might cause them to reflect upon what they are passionate about together when they had access to media (Lessig 2008). The posters and the reflection seemed to spark an intellectual light in the eyes of students who had previously been more withdrawn.

Jocelyn demonstrated an interest in this project, as did her peers. They asked questions about each other's backgrounds. Were they Dominican? Were they Haitian or Puerto Rican? Jocelyn discovered that two other students in our group were from Cape Verde as well, but she also learned that students in the group had different backgrounds that she could appreciate. Not only did this experience require the students to reflect on their own cultures, it provided an opportunity for me to expose my own. I believed that the most effective pedagogy would involve a clear form of communication between the students and me; otherwise it would have been close to impossible for the students to collaborate on media projects (Chavez and Soep 2005).

This style of pedagogy suggests that there is a strong sense of connection and collaboration between the students and instructors. To maintain this form of pedagogy and respect from my students, I sought to bring myself down from the position of "authority" as teacher-figure, to a "human-level" where the students could connect and respect my work. When I was able to establish this rapport with the students and open up about my culture, it appeared to change the dynamic in the classroom. Students seemed to become more willing to express their feelings and to acknowledge their peers' emotions and cultures. While one student wanted to be a hip-hop artist, another wanted to be an interior designer Exposing my own culture and allowing the students to acknowledge their own voice and academic desires, seemed to help establish a comfortable space in which they could make progress both socially and academically. Without this implementation at the outset of the program, it would have most likely been challenging or impossible for the students to create media projects.

The aforementioned activity inspired me to change the original idea for the curriculum of this program. Originally I hadn't put as much thought into embedding social and emotional learning into the lesson plans, but realizing the impact that the posters had on the students inspired me to create more opportunities for collaborative interaction on media projects. In an attempt to continue developing the student's social interactions, I asked them to work on a documentary together where they would each have active roles. I designed the documentary project to encourage students to work through the process of filming the documentary without simply recording and moving on. The students decided on the roles that they would assume, and they understood that they would have to write up a plan prior to filming their scenes. Deciding which roles they would assume did not appear to be a simple task for the group because many students wanted only one or two of the roles. Originally, the majority of students wanted to participate exclusively as the camerawoman or man. Due to the amount of resources available, they were forced to problem-solve because we did not have enough technology for every student. Instead, they had to create different roles such as director,

producer, and editor since there were only so many cameras and laptops that could be utilized at once. The students began to break their responsibility into shifts, allocating time for certain partners to film and then transitioning into the next role. Rather than ignoring each other's needs, the students began to acknowledge that it was polite and responsible to share roles with a partner.

While Jocelyn was an actor, another student wanted to film, and another wanted to be the director. This was the first time that I had observed the entire group working together willingly. Even the students who had not wanted to participate at first, were taken aback by their invitation to be the director or producer. Jocelyn, for example, appeared to be proud of her work. Although progress was beginning to unfold, there were a small amount of students engaged while there was still another percent of the class who continued to insult Jocelyn. I designed this assignment because it suggested that for students working on media projects, there must be a strong sense of collaboration prior to the production of the final product (Kohn 1992).

Josh's Story. The collaborative efforts that students demonstrated in the class appeared to enhance their ability to work together on media projects (Jolls 2008). One student, Josh, found it incredibly exciting to work on a music video; however, when it seemed that his peers were not as enthusiastic he withdrew from the instruction. When I asked Josh why he did not want to participate in the video, he revealed that it was because "they do not want to do it." Collaborative efforts in the classroom again seemed to be the motivating factor for the completion of media projects.

Josh was interested in hip-hop. By the end of this experience he was drafting lyrics and sharing them with me when we found the time. He was particularly proud of these lyrics, and this seems to be why he was originally thrilled to record the music video. The rest of the class, however, was more interested in either recording or directing the video. For this production, the students were required to first read through the lyrics of the song "Touch The Sky," by Kanye West. Although West is often considered a controversial artist, these lyrics promote the idea of not losing one's dream—something I found needed to be part of this curriculum.

The students often doubted themselves, and individually, if they were not confident, it didn't seem that holistically the group could be confident. Once they read through the lyrics, the students decided how they wanted to film their video. As a class, we decided that it would become more interesting if we changed the setting of the video, moving from the school as our base, to a local park where more footage could be collected. At first, the students seemed more interested in the project than they did once we went outside to film. As the instructor, I wanted the students to feel comfortable working in collaborative spaces on media projects. To demonstrate that no members of the group should be humiliated because of their performance in the project, I began to rap the lyrics along with the students in the video. As I walked side-by-side with the students, they began to participate. At first there were only two students performing in the video, and eventually that grew to four while the others were either filming of directing the video. They laughed, but this experience caused them to join along. One of the students revealed that he had never had an instructor who was willing to work on a project as I was, actually singing the song, walking alongside the students while they produced the media project. Chavez and Soep's (2005) "pedagogy of collegiality" was useful in this instance. Not only did it produce the "aha" moment for the students, encouraging them to collaborate and to not be embarrassed about participating in the video production, it also allowed me to realize that students needed encouragement to participate. This experience elevated the amount of time that the students were willing to spend on media projects.

After each class throughout the six-week program, I asked the students which project was their favorite. They always pointed back to the music video and suggested that the reason they were so inspired by this experience was because (1) they were able to film in a new setting; (2) they were able to work together to produce a music video; (3) they were able to edit the video; and (4) their instructor was willing to participate in the video. Pedagogy that emphasizes students being at the center of their learning and production can encourage youth to plan and produce projects that are valuable and reflective of their learning experiences (Weimar 2002).

Conclusion

As a result of this six-week program, I have considered how could I—as an inexperienced instructor—develop competency in my own social-emotional learning so that students might benefit from it. One way that I did this throughout the program was through my familiarization with the work of the Center for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and other major researchers in the field of social and emotional learning. Reading numerous articles on SEL helped foster a more reflective experience for the students and myself to ensure that they were not only learning to master technological know-how. The second powerful component of this program was the digital media that provided potential lessons to incorporate social and emotional practices in my classroom. Furthermore, utilizing technology in classrooms allowed my students to produce media artifacts, engage in the classroom activity while being proud of, and willing to share it with others. The third component of this media education pedagogy was to acknowledge that all students might need differentiated lesson plans. Throughout these six weeks, reflecting on the students' needs allowed me to understand that the technology we were using would be only one catalyst of change. My reading, the use of digital media, and my pedagogy appeared to encourage students to work on their collaboration skills as well as their social and emotional skills.

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