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A Comparative Perspective on Community Access to Digital Media and Technologies: Chicago and Philadelphia

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Abstract: This paper explores the potential of participatory media education to engage socioeconomically disadvantaged adults in learning and social justice by comparing two experiences of offering courses in Chicago and Philadelphia.

This paper focuses on possibilities and challenges for engaging socioeconomically disadvantaged adults in the use of digital media and technologies in urban communities. Our discussion draws on the programs that each of us has organized in Chicago and Philadelphia, respectively, over the past years. Here, we review the literature on media production within the discourses of participatory cultures and adult education. By comparing two programs that we have been involved in, we aim to contribute to theorizing media-based adult learning.

Participatory Cultures and Media Education

Our discussion builds on the participatory cultures framework, as developed by Jenkins and his associates (2009). Participatory culture is characterized by “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices” (p. xi). However, as they argued, a lack of skills and unequal access to media challenge the development of participatory cultures, and it is important to teach youth new sets of skills to cultivate the participatory use of digital media and technologies. This argument resonates with the growing popularity of such notions as New Literacies and the multimodality of literacy. Lankshear and Knobel (2006) pointed out that texts that are created with digital technologies are “seamlessly multimodal rather than distinct process for distinct modes (text, image, sound)” (p. 25). This implies that the character of literacy requires more participation from individuals in order to create and understand multimodal texts. This might have led scholars to become interested in the potential of contemporary media for democracy, as indicated in such terms as *collective intelligence* (Lévy, 1997), *smart mobs* (Rheingold, 2002), and the *wisdom of crowds* (Surowiecki, 2004). This potential seems to be even more celebrated in the current environment where ubiquitous connections made through social media (e.g., Facebook and YouTube) and mobile devices (e.g., smart phones) allow people to reach out to each other any time, anywhere. By allowing people to access unlimited information and to create and share their own messages, the new media environment seems to offer a great opportunity for forging participatory cultures.

However, as Bennett (2003) pointed out, new media only offers a platform for shaping participatory cultures and can even exacerbate the late modern process of individualization. We believe that to build participatory cultures, people need to acquire necessary skills in order to express their experiences. A barrier to this may be the fact that the prevailing discourse of participatory culture focuses on youth; adults are largely missing in it. While it is crucial to educate youth, we think that it is equally important to enable adults to gain new skills in order to express their experiences and thus engage in cultural production. In parallel, the literature of adult education has paid little attention to the use of

digital media and new technologies in this context. Most often, they have been discussed as a means for institutions to deliver distance learning in a hierarchical, one-way, ‘broadcast’ format (Kop, 2008; Selwyn, Gorard, & Furlong, 2006), as opposed to possibilities for collaborative knowledge creation. Even when the importance of learning digital technologies is emphasized, the focus tends to be on individual *marketability* in late capitalism, as is often the case in the discourses surrounding continuing professional development and re-skilling the workforce (“Fact Sheet”, 2011). Our discussion addresses this narrow treatment of digital media literacy in the context of adult education.

Participatory Video Production Courses in Chicago

In 2008, I (Kyung-Hwa) created a six-week video production course for graduates of the Odyssey Project, a Chicago-based Clemente Course that offers socioeconomically disadvantaged adults free, yearlong college courses in the humanities. In the video course, 11 participants chose to talk about education, democracy, community self-determinism, and other critical issues in their lives through video production. Sensing that the course engaged the participants in articulating and sharing their experiences and enabled them to gain technological confidence and feel fulfilled, I have offered a similar course every year since then. I regard these courses as an intervention that can prompt participants to reflect on their experiences in relation to critical social issues and to voice their concerns through media. My pedagogical approach builds on the framework of production pedagogy (De Castell, 2010), which emphasizes engaging learners in producing a product by using a tool unfamiliar to them. I introduce participants to a set of production techniques and encourage them to explore each in order to create their own media. By creating an invitational space for socioeconomically disadvantaged adults to express their experiences, I aim to contribute to progressive social change and social justice. While this objective remains the same, I have changed the course formats every year to accommodate different needs and circumstances. This type of flexibility may have contributed to bringing about positive impact on participants. Although the long-term influence of the courses on the lives of participants is unknown, they have expressed gratefulness for having the opportunity to learn new skills and expressing themselves. However, I, as the instructor and organizer, have faced some challenges.

First, one of the challenges has been around financing the courses. To sustain the courses financially, I have applied for grants and sought local partnerships every year. This made it difficult to develop the courses in a systematic way. In addition, there seemed few funding opportunities for the kind of adult education that I was pursuing. In fact, I was discouraged by the manager of city grant programs from applying for funding because the programs focus on supporting activities that involve youth or senior citizens. Thus far I have secured funding from private sources, including my scholarship and a private foundation that promotes artistic expression among less represented groups of people in society. The Illinois Humanities Council assisted me by providing a space for group meetings and supporting my grant writing. A community college and local organizations also offered their spaces for screening participant-generated videos. I believe that these partnerships have been crucial to maintaining the media courses over the years. In order for a graduate student (or even an early career scholar) to develop community-based education programs and to keep them financially sustainable, it may be necessary to build solid partnerships with established local organizations.

The second major challenge has been how to design a course for people who have little technological aptitude to be able to tell their stories effectively through media within a short period of time. I realized that not all participants had the skills that I assumed they would have. For instance, I

often had to demonstrate how to use e-mail or a web browser to some participants. For this reason, I thought that there should be a mediator who could help participants learn very basic technical skills during the course of learning how to create media. To address this, in 2012, I asked one of the previous participants to help me on this. She met some of the participants individually outside the class time to help them. As I understand, this arrangement not only helped the participants gain meaningful knowledge, but also contributed to building local capacity among the participant group.

The last challenge that I want to discuss is dissemination: How can participants' voices be heard in society? At the end of each course, I organized an event where participants could invite people and present the media they created. It was useful for participants to get an audience, however small it might be. To disseminate the media even further, I created a website, on which the media is available to view. On the one hand, as White (2003) suggested, I think that the process of media-making in and of itself is meaningful because it may facilitate further learning or action among participants. On the other, I wonder whether dissemination should be an explicit part of the courses. Encouraging participants to actively reach out to an audience beyond their families and friends may contribute to disseminating their voices widely and also turning their activities into social action. In 2011, I tried to incite a discussion on dissemination among the participants. While they seemed to agree on the importance of sharing their videos with other people, they were not explicit about how to do it. This raised some challenging questions: Who should be responsible for having participants' voices heard? How much should and could the courses contribute to social action?

Intensive Media Institutes: A Program of the Media Mobilizing Project in Philadelphia

In 2005, I (Shivaani) co-founded an organization, Media Mobilizing Project (MMP), which aims to build a social movement by combining participatory practices of media production, political education, and grassroots organizing. The desired outcomes of these practices correspond with goals of radical adult education program planning, as distilled by Brookfield and Holst (2011). MMP's educational processes originated from working with and from poor and working class movements in Philadelphia, and strive to increase people's understanding of the current socio-political economic context and social change as a historical process in order to work toward independent political organization (pp. 95-99). However, as MMP grows and requires increasing resources, implementing its radical agenda becomes more challenging. After moving away from the organization to pursue graduate study, I returned as a researcher to observe their work in 2011. Amidst considerable organizational changes, I have been especially interested in a new program of Intensive Media Institutes (Institutes), which MMP organizers developed as a way to return intentionally to their radical vision and early practices. In what follows, I critically examine their implementation in order to suggest ways in which participatory media production can contribute to radical adult education and vice versa.

The overall aim of the Institutes is to call people into collective understanding and struggle about poverty in Philadelphia and beyond. Specifically, the Institutes encourage adults to "participate" in society by producing media-based knowledge and developing collective political consciousness. The planning process surrounding the Institutes was markedly different from other recently funded educational programs, in that they were organized through a collective process involving nearly a dozen people. This team recruited thirty-five learners, on average, from diverse community-based social justice organizations to attend fifteen hours of in-person class time over three consecutive Saturdays. Each day was structured to incorporate political education sessions for the entire group and technical media

instruction, split into two groups. MMP educators underwent their own serious study in order to co-design and co-teach the political education sessions that may have included history, current economics, and mainstream media coverage of social issues. Independent movement-based media were also shown as counterpoint to specific dominant rhetoric as well as vehicles for encouraging political action. This process helped to facilitate better understanding within the large group about the connectedness of issues that seem separate or distant. For example, the educators showed part of a documentary film about striking public school teachers in Mexico who gained access to the media and were able to frame their concerns in their terms and in relation to the wider community, who then joined them in mass mobilization. This screening sparked a rich discussion among the Institute participants, as Philadelphia school officials had just announced plans to close sixty-four public schools (Graham, 2012). Discussions of this nature brought to light the importance of poor and working people learning technological skills in order to produce media from their own viewpoints and to engage in unified action (“#PhillyEducation,” 2013).

Despite the Institutes’ success in equipping learners with tools to confront inequities in today’s globalized world, their origins allude to challenges that will continue as the organization grows. Issues of sustainability and the influence of stakeholders’ interests are part of the daily considerations of program planners in community-based organizations (Cervero & Wilson, 1994, 2006). There is a long history of radical adult education within community movements that many never become aware of (Cunningham, 1989). For those who wish to grow beyond the local, questions of scale and resources are inevitable. Since 2006, when MMP decided to incorporate as a non-profit organization, there has been a greater focus on fundraising and institution building in order to increase its regional and national influence. While resources from government, private, and grassroots funds have facilitated growth in some of their organizing activities, new responsibilities mandated by grant regulations threaten to draw the organization away from its original intentions. For instance, the funding that resourced the development of the Institutes primarily required that MMP become a manager of six public computer centers and develop digital literacy education for those centers in negotiation with partnering organizations. Critical self-reflection within MMP revealed a rift that had developed between these new responsibilities and past practices. The Institutes were designed as an intervention that returned to earlier collective practices while simultaneously charting new territory within adult digital media literacy. Once receiving external funds, maintaining radical aims within community-based organizations becomes more difficult. As I critically examine the structure and evolution of the Institutes from my position as both insider and outsider, this experience revealed the vital importance of ongoing critical study and reflection at both the individual and collective levels in being able to successfully analyze and intervene in complex, day-to-day negotiations.

Discussion

Thus far, we have introduced two urban adult media education programs, addressing some of the possibilities and challenges that the programs faced in providing adult learners with opportunities to learn media production skills and to engage in society. Within the theoretical framework of participatory culture that we have examined above, we now briefly compare the two programs in order to elucidate the implications of participatory media practices in adult learning and social justice work.

Our discussion highlights different intentions and the consequent processes that have contributed to planning each program. In Chicago, Kyung-Hwa has focused on inviting participants to reflect on and

express their subjective experiences through media production. Her courses have offered socioeconomically and educationally disadvantaged adult learners a space for personal growth in a group environment. They also have offered them an opportunity to voice themselves on issues critical to their lives and to share their experiences with one another and external audiences. As Cunningham (2004) informed us, by bridging the personal and social dimensions, the courses have contributed to adult learning within a social justice framework. However, exploring how the technical skills might be used more broadly in society was not an emphasis of the courses. In contrast, the primary focus of the Institutes in Philadelphia has been fostering collective understanding of some of the most pressing current local struggles and propagating media production skills within a network of grassroots organizations. To do so, the Institutes emphasized teaching poor and working people, many of whom were also community organizers and leaders, how to use new media for their own grassroots activities. One example is teaching them how to conduct interviews with people about their living and working conditions, reactions to current events, and other social injustices they may have faced. While the Philadelphia courses could benefit more in the future by paying greater attention to the media products themselves, the emphasis has been on developing a practice that could be infused into social movement and community-based struggles.

Despite these differences, our discussion points to common concerns about sustainability, especially the importance of and potential complications with funders and partnerships with other organizations and institutions, which have their own interests and agendas. However, how each program has dealt with funding is slightly different. In Chicago, Kyung-Hwa has been the only instructor and organizer. While she has partnered with the Illinois Humanities Council, her media courses were not part of its program. Hence, Kyung-Hwa had to manage financial resources for her courses on her own. This “thin” partnership has contributed to keeping the courses independent from the overall structure and goals of the Council and flexible enough for Kyung-Hwa to explore various approaches to participatory media education with few constraints. However, the status of the courses is precarious, given the dependence on one instructor and the possibility of not acquiring funds. In contrast, the Intensive Media Institutes in Philadelphia is a program of MMP. Under the umbrella of a strong community-based institution, the Institutes were resourced by major grants, which contributed to planning its activities on a larger scale than in Chicago. At the same time, the instructors of the Institutes had to work under the regulations of the funding. This prompted them to have ongoing reflection and discussion about their original mission and the contradictions inherent in the practical work for social change.

Looking at these two programs side by side, we conclude with a shared belief that participatory media education has the potential to raise adult learners’ consciousness and to foster broader engagement in society. We also realize that there may be a variety of participatory media practices that engage adults in learning and social justice. As Jenkins (2009) commented, it may be useful and necessary to “adopt a multifront perspective” such as “offering critiques of the corporate web 2.0 model, shoring up the alternative grassroots model of participatory culture, promoting educational and political reforms” (para. 8) in order to identify how participatory media can contribute to social justice and be implemented in diverse circumstances. At the same time, it is critical to have reliable funding in order to provide adult learners with a space to participate in shaping their cultures and voicing themselves on sociopolitical issues in society. One critical issue in this regard may be how to resolve tensions between the goals of participatory media practice and constraints that may be tied to funding.

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