

Running Head: WHERE THEY LIVE

Where they live: Community media centers as hubs for building
technological literacy, media literacy, and active citizenship

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Abstract

Education is becoming a 24/7 experience driven by media experiences and technological exploration. The challenge is to find innovative ways to develop technological literacy, media literacy, and active citizenship in non-traditional educational systems. Community media organizations are each unique possessing talents, strengths, and ingenuity to reach people where they live by providing learning opportunities across the lifespan and across the socio-economic spectrum in communities around the world. In these centers, access exists for education in computing, media literacy, academic content, creative expression, workforce preparedness, or to learn means of affecting social change. Research will show how developing these organizations can create important hubs connecting people with educational systems, as well as serving to develop innovative technologies for the public good. Technological, creative, social, economic, and organizational development disciplines all have a stake in community media as providers of the environment, equipment, and education for gaining the skills and literacies needed in the 21st century. By building capacity in these valuable organizations, new opportunities will emerge for technological, educational, and social innovation including strengthened learning of desired skills and literacies, utilization of newly developed digital arts teaching and learning practices, and increases in equitable access to the public media discourse.

Challenges

Undoubtedly there are multiple problems in education that lack simple solutions. Among these are: unacceptable dropout rates; unsuccessful traditional educational systems; technology gaps in workforce preparedness; limitations in access to higher education for underrepresented populations; and, as yet unforeseen challenges that the proliferation of new media is creating for meeting educational goals. Outside of educational systems, scores of social and cultural challenges exist that are not new but are becoming increasingly more difficult to address. These include: educating people not engaged in traditional school systems; providing access for those without technological resources; and, ensuring that people from across the socio-economic spectrum have a voice in the public discourse. In an era where the need for a technologically proficient workforce is near crisis, unemployment is rampant, and traditional educational systems are losing an enormous percentage of potential intellectual capital, it is necessary to look beyond problem-solving to focus on creating innovative alternative systems for serving the technological and social needs of public education.

The swell of media consumption and individualized production capacity creates a need for people of all ages to learn to effectively engage in media in ways that move beyond consumption and novelty production to meaningful engagement with their geographic and virtual communities. Individuals fortunate enough to have resources, yet not in traditional educational systems, learn through experimentation. Many become experts through their own initiative, able to use and develop technologies, and perhaps able to create media for their own expression or for a greater good. People without the necessary social and economic capital cannot experiment with digital media tools; are excluded from the acquisition of skills; do not have access to employment opportunities available only to the technologically literate; and, lack access to effectively participate in the public media discourse.

Community media organizations (CMOs) provide the education, environment, and equipment for the public to express themselves through media. As a subgroup of community technology centers (CTCs), these organizations generally are not-for-profit and exist in countless forms providing equipment access and training in technology, while additionally offering support for the creation of media content, social programs, and access to distribution channels. They exist to serve as advocates for freedom of expression, teach media literacy, and bring diverse groups together in environments that support self-directed learning. Small CMOs are often embedded within other public institutions such as universities or libraries while some are stand-alone organizations. There are thousands worldwide serving the public good by providing empowerment and education to individuals through access to technological resources along with instruction in effective media expression.

Many CMOs are grassroots organizations utilizing modest resources to meet their missions with ingenuity, passion, and dedication to service. The staff is often highly skilled technologically as well as creatively, and active in social justice issues through production of documentary media, inclusive educations, and community outreach. The outcomes in these organizations are as varied as the forms with some offering high school or college credit, certifications, enrichment courses, or project-based learning through productions. The common outcome is that individuals of all ages and from across the socio-economic strata can take part in the public media discourse as they learn about and experiment with technologies. These organizations are vital public resources with valuable lessons to share about teaching, outreach, equity advocacy, and organizational ingenuity.

Creating Capabilities

The capabilities to be created are strong, well-supported media arts centers with increased capacity for technological and social innovations that can provide educational alternatives for the

diverse talent that exists outside of traditional educational systems. By moving beyond the concept of ‘in-formal’ education to one of ‘alternative’ education, and using innovative means of accrediting achievement, it is possible to create new ways for those who have not succeeded in traditional systems to access learning opportunities and potentially enter the pipeline that leads to a technologically proficient public.

Through appreciative inquiry, an organizational development method used in action research, the goal is to identify existing effective education, production, technological, and social practices within community media centers, then harness that expertise while developing increased capacity for these organizations to serve the public in technology, media, and active citizenship. In the process, designs of effective digital media learning environments will be gathered that are applicable in other educational contexts. The intended outcome is to strengthen existing organizations within communities where people live to facilitate individuals as learn about media, experiment with new technologies, develop tangible skills, and have a voice in their community. An additional outcome is an inventory of resources, practices, and lived examples that demonstrate how digital arts education results in tangible technological skill building, media literacy, and civic engagement. In the process, media arts centers will gain the capacity to serve as hubs for connecting people with emerging virtual educational systems and to facilitate entry into traditional higher education.

Context

Exciting educational theories are emerging that tie the benefits of media-based experiences with pedagogy that engages people through participatory learning culture. People learn through affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem solving, and circulation of the digital work drive that moves work from individual expression to community involvement (Jenkins, 2010). The communities defined may be geographically based or virtual with

participatory culture as the central theme. Jenkins defines desirable skills and multiple literacies built on the foundation of traditional academic knowledge that incorporates aesthetic, socially based, and meta-cognitive skills as necessary for learners to function successfully in media-rich environments. Learning happens through self-directed creative production and communication, that is if the individual has access to technology resources, space, guidance, and the time to experiment and explore.

Designs of community media spaces are being explored in an anthropological study investigating the information and communication technology (ICT) use patterns of contemporary youth. This research spurred development of YOUMedia Center in Chicago's Harold Washington Library. The center is design with spaces that highlight how youth use media to socialize, experiment, or deeply explore digital technologies (Itō et al., 2009). Similar facilities are being developed for media centers in libraries and museums nationally.

While CTCs have existed for decades, funding cuts have radically diminished their reach and effectiveness. Research into CMOs as facilitators of the technological needs of people across the socio-economic spectrum describes characteristics and histories of these organizations telling how many emerged as a result of public cable access legislation in the 1970s with dedicated funding sources (Howley, 2005). Internet and satellite TV options, along with changing FCC regulations are decreasing funding from cable franchise fees leaving municipalities unable to support the media organizations born from these sources. This loss is causing a sustainability crisis that threatens their existence, leaving a void in technological access, educational opportunity, and social services, while diminishing equity in public media discourse.

Disciplines, Questions, and Impact

There are a wide range of disciplines with the potential to explore fruitful research in community media including education, computing, media arts, sociology, economics, and

organizational development. The very nature of media arts organizations and the production process creates opportunities for connecting multiple disciplines to investigate challenging technological, educational, and social questions, and create ways to form innovative solutions.

Creating media in academic content areas is quickly becoming a widely used means of authentic assessment of student learning. While there are many stylistic ways to construct media productions around academic content areas, inherently there are components of design, research, planning, legalities, management, collaboration, and technology usage. How can CMOs work with traditional educational institutions to share expertise about media production for teaching, learning, and authentic assessment?

Lack of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) knowledge is at crisis levels. How can talented people who are not in formal educational systems access technology education and professions? Digital media production provides access to computing education that allows for development of increasing levels of sophistication. Novice media producers initially utilize equipment with some technological support. As their work progresses, they are increasingly challenged by computing aspects necessary for mastery of the craft including encoding of imagery and sound, databases for managing media, software for editing, as well as the technology associated of distribution. How can they move to becoming digital technology innovators in alternative educational contexts?

Media arts as a discipline has undergone paradigmatic shifts with changes in how content is produced, distributed, consumed, shared, and evaluated. Now more than ever people need to be educated consumers capable of evaluating the flood of content coming into their lives. Media literacy—that is understanding of content, message, audience, text and subtext—is not only as a basic skill of an educated person, but is crucial to being an active, informed citizen. How does

the public become educated about the impact that media has on their intellectual, social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances?

From a sociological perspective, research into community-based media arts could answer questions about how to effectively engage people who are disenfranchised from traditional education and as such are underrepresented in technological professions. The potential exists to use documentary techniques to gain insight into an outreach mechanism that effectively touches people where they live, serves their needs, and creates ways for them to document their own experiences. Media organizations are located in communities around the world serving diverse populations, giving voice to underrepresented people who otherwise would not be heard in mainstream media. Many are founded on the principal of advocating the protection of free speech and the rights of the public to access distribution channels unfettered.

From an socio-economic standpoint, this research can investigate how these organizations function as access points for people to meet basic needs such as applying for employment and researching governmental services. Individuals who were educated in public schools prior to the 1990s had little formal training on computer technologies. How can these community access points provide services for the millions of people educated during the industrial-based economy?

As an innovative means of organizational development, CMOs such as Media Bridges in Cincinnati, use their in-house technological, production, and creative staff to engage in social entrepreneurialism to generating income by providing professional quality media production services to non-profit organizations. What other social entrepreneurial opportunities could be developed as a result of community technology and would they work in other contexts? What other market-worthy technological advances might emerge in the process?

Conclusion

While significant challenges exist for educating the public in technological literacy, media literacy, and active citizenship, there are innovative ways to research alternative educational opportunities within existing resources. Identifying successful practices and increasing capacity within community media centers can provide the education, environment, and technology for the people where they live to allow them to develop in multiple ways. Building the capacity of these organizations into educational access hubs will drive innovative teaching, technology development, and provide richer, more equitable public discourse.

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