

Civic Engagement

Implementing the DASP Business Plan

Goal 3 –Improve, enhance and build civic engagement and social capital among youth.

There are at least six types of “civic engagement programs” that could be constructed to build civic engagement among youths using digital media arts.

1. Oral History projects –Family Heritage and Community Heroes.

Family Heritage is a program where a student who is in a class that uses digital media (could be a video production class, could be a humanities class, English class, drama class, etc). In this model the student will create an oral history project (with B roll added for context) or a biography of a family member, perhaps an elderly person, whose purpose is to celebrate some aspect of their life (or all aspects). One variant among students who do this well is to put them into an advanced class that has been called “Repertory Theater” a class for credit in the theater or drama department, where they would be available to be hired for after-school projects (for pay) or service credit or class credit where they would meet with any elder, do interviews, historical research, story building ideas. Let’s say my dad is retiring from his work as a fireman after so many years, and I would like to celebrate his life and service to the community. The youth could be tasked with interviewing elder, co-workers, family members, gather biographic info, gather B roll for added context (that could taken from newspapers, video, could be of the fire house or particular fire) or just as context for how the town looked 40 years ago. Student would use video still methods such as pan and zoom, mixed with live action.

Student would get a contract for work

The part of the Oral History was the **Community Heroes** project where a person, usually someone unknown to or under-appreciated by the community at large who had done one or more exemplary acts of goodness, wisdom, honor, justice, etc. Nominees and sponsorship can come from any group, business, and organization. In this instance regional DASP’s will act as producers. The do not have to be restricted to employing kids at one high school but could go beyond those affiliations and the production could be accomplished at a school site or at any number of participating organizations (our club, atelier or hubs).

This brings up the issue of what we mean by Digital Arts Studio Partnership. It’s digital because we emphasis the use and training in emerging technology, it is Arts because we are concerned with an aesthetic agenda to return cultural values to our society and arts classes to our schools, it’s studio because we look at the constellation of all the necessary aspects of a film in exactly the same way a commercial documentary or feature film production team would do. We need producers, directors, actors, writers, costumers, art directors, cinematographers, editors, marketing experts and showcases. We need to develop means to find ideas, build content, find financing, and perform pre-production, production and post-production. We believe therefore at the regional level we need to have all the parts of a studio within our organization.

Each of these two versions an Oral History project will require:

- a) Leadership and animation from DASP or from a teacher or school.
- b) Student capacity to independently (with some help) produce a quality piece.

- c) Financial support to produce the film, studio time, rental of equipment, student stipends, perhaps teacher stipends (although more than likely we would reserve teacher stipends to teachers who undergo rigorous professional development through participation in DASP trainings, some of which have been done already.
- d) Student desire to engage in his or her community to produce work “bigger than their own personal vision.”
- e) Will require sequential class-work and curriculum in theater, film/video in a school or through community setting (SF Film workshop for example)
- f) Tri-caster capacity
- g) Access to low-frequency television broadcasting

2. Non-profit Service – See DAPP

This is where we would market our capacity as a documentary studio to all of those non-profits in our community who do not have the financial resources to do stories, short videos of their work, PSAs, websites, other applications (one example might be that a legal aid group needs the capacity to do a digital animation of an accident or other legal issue, Another might need to present interviews to the city council about why they need funds or staff and have no funds or little funding to do so.

DASP will be fund-raising at the state and regional level to find money to produce these kinds of projects. There may be cases where it is more appropriate to offer service credits or class credits from a community college or high school.

The non-profit Service project will require:

- a) A flexible school setting, such as a career tech academy, charter school or magnet program, to allow students to get “credit” for their work.
- b) DASP to look for financing for these projects. One place to do this is like the Ad Council that might sponsor PSAs
- c) Distribution of products – DASP coordinators must find ways to showcase or distribute work. I think if we gain credibility we will be able to find places for community ads that all television and radio stations must perform to get and maintain their license.
- d) Must have a vigorous and aggressive recruitment process for inviting non-profits to work with us.
- e) An industry ready work-force among our youth. I also expect that when kids graduate from high school or community college we may find funding for “bridge” projects that employ recent graduates for a short period as part of the donations that our member companies make.
- f) TriCaster capacity

3. Public Policy

One of the most significant ways of producing civic capital is to encourage youth to be involved in public policy. That is, giving youth the means and opportunity to research, present and organize change within our local, state and possibly federal systems. Here are some thoughts on how we should organize this area:

- a. Developing a structure like that of the California Senior Legislature. This is different in many ways from the “Boys State” version of student public policy development. First off- it is a real rather than mock legislature. It is outcome or product rather than process oriented. The purpose of the CSL meeting in Sacramento in October in the legislative chambers is not just to have education meetings, but to do the very hard work of researching, presenting, debating, passing and most importantly “exporting” legislation to the California Legislature. Every two years (four years for senior senators) seniors run for the CSL from within each of the 33 triple A’s (area agencies on aging). The week long session has a hearing in committees and then on the floors. On the final day, the whole legislature meets to choose the top ten priorities. Then the Commission on Aging that “sponsors” the CSL tries to recruit legislative members to draft bills based on the top ten.
- b. We could use some sort of school based local council that elects a student from each participating school to form a regional legislature that could publicize the public policy changes or specific bill ideas to legislators. I can see students using a number of structures to do this:
 1. May consist of a collaboration between a student videographer and a student in a civics or government class, where they collaborate on a certain project. (we suggest a version of this later under “Investigative Journalism” number 6).
 2. May consist of a joint project with the office of local city councilman or commissioner to solve a problem using video to examine the problem/issue and its solution(s).
 3. On-line “election” using Youtube or MySpace or other social network where students can lay out their “legislation” and “voters” can vote on which idea is the best. It might be the case that a teacher or mentor suggests one or more issues and students do videos on the issue and their solution which they offer on-line.
 4. Special Project or Independent studies class to do the same.
 5. Civic organizations such as Soroptimists sponsor an issue that youth can examine, and they would pay for production of one or more winning ideas.
 6. Maybe DASP could meet with local newspaper editorial board of editors who would choose subjects to be examined and maybe funds to sponsor student examinations.

This kind of activity will require:

1. A class or school based structure to organize the activity
2. A sponsoring organization
3. Funding for the production
4. DASP as intermediary between community group and students
5. DASP to recruit newspaper or television stations to sponsor project.
6. Means to “pay” student.
7. Connection to legislature, city council, commission or other group to take up sponsorship of student legislation (I use the term to refer to a real bill, or legislative idea) students will need mentors in the legislative body to teach students how to write and pass bills.
8. Collaborators or sponsors such as lobbying groups who might need to have student production be used in a legislative circumstance. This would more of a collaboration between let’s say Lung Association and student than a simple student project.
9. TriCaster capacity, access, low frequency television

4. Social marketing

Students could do any number of “Social Marketing” ventures. The best example of this is the California Department of Health services Anti-Tobacco campaigns, where over years the department through a series of pointed, sarcastic, biting ads has de-programmed the public from the years and years of successful tobacco industry ads glamorizing tobacco. Studies began in the 90s to show clearly that smokers knew the potential health risks but were unable to quit because they so closely associated themselves as “smokers” or young persons were yielding to engrained marketing done by the tobacco industry to portray tobacco as cool. The antidote was equally strong counter-marketing, called “social marketing.”

At the national level, the “truth” campaign that came out of a Florida program is paid for by tobacco settlement dollars is also the kind of youth conceived, youth directed work that is hugely authentic.

One of Cal DASPs function will be to identify health and human service initiatives that could also be fertile ground for youth media productions. No state agency or foundation has mined the potential of social networks to drive home various points, in many cases to do what the “truth” campaign does, to counter the efforts of corporations to exploit the youth band-wagon, that is selling all kinds of youth oriented merchandize under the guise of hip and cool.

I believe that we can use the kind of work that Robbie Conal has done in visual arts. His exploits lampooning right wing politicians have employed young artists to do “bill-board” art. His work is a form of social marketing. We have no artist working in video and film who is his counterpart, but we could explore ways to use similar tactics for social change. Such work would never be part of a school based locus of activity, but a community video guerilla team might be helped along by employing DASP as a systematized collector and repository of data and facts that could be used by young videographers to work for social change. Finding funding sources is a challenge. Conal prints and sells copies of his work to replenish the costs of production of the murals and billboards.

Less radical approaches to youth digital social marketing might also be found.

5. Interdisciplinary Academic work

DASP could also help students enhance their civic engagement by funding schools to produce video or film works that illuminate curriculum in other academic classes.

For example in my previous work, I used my repertory theater class to have students who were being graded in theater, meet with teachers in social studies or science or English departments where the youth production team (I often would create competing teams like the King’s Men, the Knaves, etc, catchy names for a sub-theater) to find areas of academic curriculum that needed to be more efficiently taught using art. My most well-known work was a play called “the Solar System Live” where I recreated a unit on the solar system designed for 5th graders where my acrobats and players recreated the solar system using actors and humorous ways of producing the workings of the solar system which for example used the character of Pluto who was small and un-lit racing around the

Perimeter of the school yard at full speed while Mercury was in his bathing suit, very slowly orbiting the Sun, (which as a group of students in an acrobatic pose holding search lights and “expelling” gases) .We ended up training 5th graders to recreate the play, while learning the facts of the solar system. My challenge to the principal and classroom teachers was students who worked on the production, which was everyone in the class, would out-perform other classes using traditional methods. I always won the challenge and we all ended up on television, which was in itself theater since critics also got a chance to offer their perspective that kids were having way too much fun and questioned whether learning was taking place. My superintendent surprised me by doing “tests” on the last day of the school year. Our students retained material almost as well as when tested initially, while the other traditional group had students who barely remembered studying the solar system.

In my case, we did a dozen or so plays that were videoed and became source material for various classes. Such topics were “Violence during the age of industrialization” “How the West Was Really Won” “Quantum Physics” and so forth.

I go on at length here because these are ideas which have been done and are replicable. Cathee Cohen from Cleveland High School in Reseda has numerous examples of students working with teachers in other areas to do videos and films that become part of the curriculum.

What is needed for these activities:

1. Students trained in video and theater arts.
2. Rapport with teachers in other departments.
3. flexibility in scheduling and giving credit to account for collaborations, that is how do we get students credit for a class in which they work as teams, share outcome measurements and who may do radically different kinds of work in the same class
4. Agreements with teachers of different academic classes.
5. Students access to cameras and production facilities.

6. Investigative Journalism

Lastly, another area of activity is investigative journalism. The purpose of the above 5 areas is principally to tell stories about the community people in the community or to enhance subject content area in school.

In “investigative journalism” the purpose is to build capacity for youth to question the way things are not explaining or describing the status quo or even a personal vision. Our youth are not used to being in a power position. They are used to being the role of the receiver of messages aimed at them by commercial interests that tend to blend or conflate personal characteristics and distinctions into neat niches for product sales. As such the youth view themselves as “consumers” In this world of commercialization one young person is as good as another. It is the high tech version of barefoot and pregnant.

One of the objectives behind establishing the third goal of DASP, building or enhancing civic engagement and social capital is to turn the equation upside down and build a worldview where the young person is a producer of product, a sender of messages, not just a passive consumer. Therefore, the school system will need to support and encourage the active role of the youth- producer by providing access to emerging technology and giving them the skill set to produce better work and build stronger bonds with other youth through showing work in

every possible venue and context. It could be a film festival, it could be a TriCaster broadcast, it could be a pod-cast, it could be text messaging (think poetry on the I-phone or homework assignments) it could be audio broadcasting or low frequency television or cable access, it could be collaborations between artists at various kinds of internet cafes or internet “restaurants.” It might also be through active participation in virtual communities.

The environment that will best nurture DASP is the idea of the Digital Village, a social structure that promotes interdependence and interconnectivity. Breaking down artificial barriers and borders ought to be one of DASPs main functions.

One of the unfortunate outcomes of the digital revolution is the demise of hard copy newspaper as the dominant source of information and news, replaced by cable news networks that are run from central locations, mostly on the east coast. Much like Clear Channel in music broadcasting, these centralized news purveyors have been compromised by the whims and perspective of wealthy owners. For example, who can ignore the consequences of an entity like FOX news that promotes non-stop biased “news.”

Unless, our society, lead by our youth can undercut this centralization of power by providing insights and information from real sources, and local perspectives, our very identity as a thriving democracy is in jeopardy. The most powerful tool at our disposal is youths capacity to do investigative journalism, free from commercial concerns and working at the most intimate and humanistic levels.

How can we involve and young people and invest resources in these activities? One barrier is of course, is the absence of real journalism classes in our high schools. Communications departments are being shredded in a similar manner as digital media departments. It may be that we have to go around or outside school walls to accomplish our goals. It may that we must use digital media classes and local school news broadcasts as a Trojan horse to more robust and powerful journalism.

Another potential pathway is to develop digital literacy capacity for our students, one strand of which is understanding propaganda and its uses. One possible pathway is to pose the question slightly differently, that is, what is the inverse of understanding propaganda? One answer is empowerment of counter-news makers, not so much as propaganda but rather as indigenous news gatherers and broadcasters. If youth can gain access to youth directed media broadcasts utilizing a youth vision of the world that is unbiased, local, humanistic and democratic, those youth receiving messages will immediately recognize propaganda and its allies for what it is.

What we need to further these activities in investigative journalism:

1. Seek funds from “democracy” projects and foundations
2. Build a network of community organizations that will sponsor classes and or broadcast capacity.
3. Strengthen digital literacy classes and seek continuity in digital literacy articulation in K-12 systems.
4. Pairing students with real reporters as role models and guides to the art of journalism.
5. Venues for reporting out interviews and news

7/14/09