

Green Guerrillas Youth Media Tech Collective: Sustainable Storytellers Challenging The Status Quo

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Abstract: The Green Guerrillas Youth Media Tech Collective, a community organization based in Ithaca, New York, set out to define sustainability in their own terms by giving a diverse group of local adolescents the opportunity to engage subjects of environmental and social justice through digital media production within the auspices of a unique afterschool job-training program. Interviews with youth participants and adult mentors illustrate key concepts for environmental and sustainability educators desiring to facilitate engaging learning environments utilizing multimedia. Excerpts of their interviews provide a lens into the workings of a non-formal educational environment that explicitly embraced media literacy, media arts production, and community engagement to advocate for issues of justice and sustainability while facilitating opportunities for ecological learning. This case study highlights the potential of digital storytelling to foster students' knowledge retention, connection to nature, sense of empowerment, and ability to create positive change in their communities.

Keywords: Digital media, storytelling, non-formal education, Indigenous, youth, empowerment

Introduction

The increasing use of electronic media has been associated with decreasing time spent outdoors (Pergams & Zeradic, 2006) and a general disconnection from the environment, namely Nature Deficit Disorder (Louv, 2008). A challenge for contemporary environmental educators is how to thoughtfully and effectively utilize digital media tools that are ubiquitous in modern life. A narrative-based case study of one program that embraced media production and literacy as a core component of its pedagogy offers insights to this challenge.

The Green Guerrillas Youth Media Tech Collective (GGs hereafter) was an after-school job-training program (2006-2011) established to meet the needs of adolescents of color in Ithaca, NY. It was founded by Leslie Jones, an African-American human rights attorney and community organizer, and myself, a Seneca filmmaker and environmentalist. It was administered by our nonprofit organization, Southern Tier Advocacy and Mitigation Project (STAMP), which formed in response to the frequency young people of color are referred to the juvenile justice system, a phenomenon often referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (NAACP-LDF, 2006). Twenty-five high school students from low-income and working class households participated in this media-focused environmental education program during its existence.

The pedagogical practices in GGs were primarily informed by the founders’ backgrounds in social justice and environmental activism, documentary media production, and outdoor education. We felt an integrated, holistic approach to learning in the group, with a hands-on experiential emphasis, would be the most effective way of raising awareness and promoting ethical behaviors. Indigenous philosophies, particularly those of the Haudenosaunee (Akwesasne Notes, 1978) and Zapatistas (Ramirez, 2008), and approaches to learning that center storytelling (Cajete, 1994; Hermes, 2000; ChiXapKaid, 2005) inspired the ideology, curriculum, and praxis of GGs. Other significant influences included multicultural environmental education (Running Grass, 1995), nature-based learning (Young et al., 2008), and the Positive Youth Development framework (Innovative Center for Community and Youth Development, 2003). The concepts of “youthtopias” (Akom et al., 2008), youth culture as a platform for social change (Guins, 2008), and living as learning to move away from educational systems perpetuating an intolerable status quo (Prakash & Esteva, 1998) were central to the group.

Participants were exposed to a wide variety of perspectives on environmental and social issues through collectively researching and discussing topics, critically analyzing media, and interviewing diverse knowledge holders. Four feature length documentaries created by the group were screened widely and made available on DVD, in addition to a number of shorts made for the group’s YouTube channel¹. Stories were central to learning and educating others about a broad concept of sustainability that incorporated social justice, as well as the development of critical thinking and advocacy skills to effect change. The group often referred to themselves as “sustainable storytellers challenging the status quo.” Digital still and video cameras were also utilized to engage participants’ interest in local environments through “Ecocinema” projects,

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/user/stampcnny>

where the aesthetics of nature and digital media came together to generate excitement about spending time outdoors and ecological learning.

Methods and Subjects

25 youth participated in GGs during its five-year existence. Most were involved for approximately a year. For a few it was only for a summer session, however there were several involved for multiple years. Indigenous and narrative methodologies-based research about GGs was conducted in 2014, as part of my doctoral dissertation (Corwin, 2016), with nine group members who had participated in the group anywhere from one to five years being interviewed on video. The interviews provide a lens into the workings of a non-formal educational environment that explicitly embraced media literacy, media arts production, and community engagement to advocate for issues of justice and sustainability while facilitating opportunities for ecological learning. The study's objective was to elucidate the dynamics of GGs pedagogy through a rich description of the experiences and their ascribed meanings of the people who had the most sustained engagement with it.

Table 1. Participants Interviewed from Green Guerillas Youth Media Tech Collective

Name	Age at interview	Age when in GGs	Gender	Ethnicity/Nationality
Patrick Booker	23	16-17	male	African-American
Che Broadnax*	37	29-31	male	African-American
Ian Dezelan	21	15-18	male	Mexican-American
Greg Jackson	23	16-17	male	African-American
Sequoya Lee	19	14-16	female	African-American
Gabriel (Gabe) Pontes	22	16-19	male	African-American
Kyrie Ransom**	27	20-21	female	Mohawk
Kierra Winston	22	14-19	female	African-American
Maggie Zhang	24	17-21	female	Chinese-American

* Adult mentor.

** Youth participant who returned as a mentor.



Lights, Camera, Activism

GGs provided on average 15-20 hours of programming per week year-round. In addition to a wide variety of local activities, the group travelled often to events that provided

opportunities to meet people, build relationships, and engage tangible expressions of sustainability and justice. Documentary video and photography shoots at diverse local outdoor spaces such as community gardens, organic farms, and nature preserves, as well as annual camping trips, provided GGs opportunities to develop personal connections to nature while learning about environmental subjects. Participants planned, researched and discussed what to learn on trips while preparing to interview a diverse array of individuals including hip hop artists, community organizers, traditional Indigenous leaders, former political prisoners, filmmakers, green entrepreneurs, community gardeners, foresters, and farmers.

Unlike many mainstream environmental education programs, GGs openly embraced advocacy/activism through community engagement and digital storytelling. Local and global environmental, political, and economic issues were regularly researched and critically analyzed in group discussions. In addition to frequently viewing documentaries on topics such as pollution, climate change, food, social movements challenging exploitation of people and natural resources in Indigenous and marginalized communities, GGs also screened self-produced videos and gave presentations at conferences on sustainability and social justice. They demonstrated their proficiency in the skills of community organizing and advocacy when they actively challenged racial discrimination in the Ithaca City School District in 2007 and “fracking” in 2010 by speaking out at both school board and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation hearings, while continuing to create and distribute media to educate and persuade for change.

Igniting the Spark for Engaged Learning

One of the key pedagogical practices of the group was called “PE,” which was short for political education, a concept borrowed from the adult mentors’ experiences in activist groups. At least once a week, a documentary or narrative film was viewed and critically discussed. Some of the subjects regularly engaged with included racism, sustainable agriculture, environmental justice, political prisoners, the history of social movements such as the Black Panthers and the American Indian Movement, and cultural expression, such as music and dance. As media makers GGs would look at the structure and aesthetics of productions in order to study the art of compelling storytelling, though content was equally important. By learning to think critically about the information in a movie through having dialogue with others who shared a variety of opinions and viewpoints on a given subject, it allowed the group to expand knowledge of the world while exercising interpersonal communications skills.

Ian: I think because we had the big round table for discussions it was human-to-human learning too. Not only were you learning about something new but you also learned about how other people saw the subject or this problem. So you got that perspective too that you wouldn’t have in class cause you’re just learning it from a teacher, a book, with a very certain angle to it or a bias that just presents it in one simple way. Usually things aren’t that simple. . . . It was good to also develop those language skills, too, and discussion skills in order to get your ideas across in a way that’s helpful to the person. . . . We were all very much learning together . . . like a shared development.

GGs was designed to facilitate a passionate engagement with learning that would be fulfilling and empowering to marginalized youth at risk for criminalization and poor educational outcomes. While at any given time some were doing well in school and others not so well, they frequently commented that they found the group's learning environment to be more supportive and enjoyable than their formal education. The topics examined as a group were typically ones they were not learning about in school, but were relevant to their lives as young people of color, and attracted their interest. What resonated most strongly with them was being part of a learning community where everyone's opinions and thoughts were valued while being able to engage in hands-on self-directed learning. In interviews participants expressed that crucial components of a successfully engaging pedagogy included the exploration of new ideas in a critical but also safe social learning environment, having a concrete sense of accomplishment, spontaneity, flexibility, and the dedication of the adult mentors.

Gabe: It was different [laughs]. It was my first job basically. It was weird cause it was a lot of learning and it was learning a bunch of stuff I wasn't familiar with, like sustainability. That was one of the first questions y'all asked me was — do you know what sustainability is? And I was like, nooo [laughs]. From there it just had a lot to do with consciousness and being aware of what's going on. That wasn't something that was ever really brought to my forefront of having to know.

Gabe expresses a sentiment that was shared by many of the interviewees. They did not expect a media production job-training program to have such an intensive educational focus. Some of them, like Gabe, had a pre-existing interest in digital media and were referred to the program by another youth agency.

Digital storytelling was chosen as a core activity as it was felt it would be accessible and engaging for young people in an electronic media-centric age, in addition to being an effective means of communicating ideas to wider audiences. Topics such as solar energy and biofuels might not be interesting at first to this demographic of teens, however media production served as a significant bridge to environmental education, as well as exposure to other unfamiliar topics and ideas.

Che: It was an access point that was not weird; it was not radical to them. It was something that they all thought about and thought was kind of cool. Media was still, even if it's everywhere, it's still kind of cool. Just that alone made it a really great choice for some of the other stuff we were doing.

All of the interviewees articulated that learning to work with digital media provided a stimulating experience that engaged their creativity while being an avenue for them to feel empowered.

Greg: I learned a lot through editing and filming and photography. I didn't know that, but I had a lot of fun doing that. I learned that I could actually see myself doing that. . . . Interviewing people — I think I can come up with some pretty good interview questions.

Developing the ability to conduct an interview is a foundational component of documentary video work, as well as an important aspect of an inquiry-based learning process. When Greg joined the program his only media experiences were informal with a family camcorder. Some of the youth came into the program with a background in creating digital media for their personal enjoyment and social media, which facilitated their interest in the program's activities.



Kyrie joined the first cohort of the group in the summer of 2006 with videography experiences from her high school's Indigenous media production class. Her deep interest in this area helped her connect with the program.

Kyrie: So for me, I love that field, I love the whole media aspect to it. To bring that into a program like Green Guerrillas, it just enhanced everything and it kept things interesting cause there was a purpose. . . . So to have this media there, it's a catalyst to do that, to express ourselves and to go through and tell whatever story we have that day.

While they expressed both pleasure and satisfaction from participating in digital storytelling activities, in their interviews several GGs also associated it with a significant amount of learning. As adult mentors of the group, we observed that the process of conducting interviews with

knowledgeable informants and gathering material for the video projects fostered a dynamic learning process.

Che: If you take a teenager somewhere and then have someone lecture them about something, that's boring to them. But if you take a teenager somewhere and have them actively interview that person, they might not care about the topic, but they're engaged in the information getting process. When they have to think about what questions to ask and the information they're getting, how to change their questions based on that, they engage in active knowledge building cause they have to synthesize that information. In terms of how the storytelling played into the environmental stuff and the cultural stuff I think they were . . . building knowledge . . . through the mechanism of it being an interview and it being a documentary.

Maggie: Because we made our own documentaries, that definitely helped, cause without research we couldn't have made them. Anything hands-on, I need visuals and I need to see and learn. Having to do research, all the interviews, and then having to put things together, having to re-watch everything over again, definitely that helped. It was a good interactive experience.

The various phases of media production fosters extended exposure to information. Research is done as a part of pre-production. Interviews and other footage are seen and heard multiple times during the course of reviewing and selecting material for editing, thereby reinforcing retention of content.

Several of the participants express in their interviews gaining a great deal of satisfaction in realizing the power of the stories they created to reach and educate others because of the accessibility of the media format they were working in. That process reinforced the development of an identity that they were agents of social change.

Ian: So because we're learning about things that we want to draw attention to and we want more people to know about, using media to do that, especially cameras and video, which is pretty accessible, it was incredibly helpful and essential to the whole process. It wouldn't have been the same if we were simply just learning about that and then doing little presentations out in the middle of this park for example. Not only can you reach more people, but you can replay it. Video is something that is incredibly useful for the things we were concerned about like injustice and environmental issues. Everyone is sharing videos nowadays. On Facebook your friends will share something and then you'll watch it and share it with another friend. You're less likely to tell your friend about like this newsletter that you received in email. It's just not quite as attention grabbing.

Ian highlights digital video's wide reach in today's social media environment and its readily accessible nature. He contrasts the reach of it with what could be accomplished by only doing an oral presentation of information in a public setting while seeing the possibility of viewing a video multiple times as one of its benefits for educational purposes.

Sequoia: Well in a really simple way it's useful when documenting things. So you're able to document something and you have that product right there to go back to it. When people are saying things you have it exactly the way it's said. I think that influences being able to go back to things and have that information and it's constantly in your head. It's always there versus you learning once and it's gone. I think it's connected to where activism work is going and heading. The way we are connected and getting issues out. Getting the word out is through media so I feel like we were doing it before it became a big thing.

All of the GGs who were interviewed took pride in their digital storytelling skills. Several of them expressed that it was especially meaningful to them that their videos didn't look amateurish or something that a group of kids put together for a school project. The equipment they used was broadcast quality and the software that they edited on was the same as used by many media professionals. They worked hard so that their videos were polished, with high production values, while still maintaining an enjoyable and accessible aesthetic based on contemporary youth culture.

Sequoia: The professionalism for me came through our quality. So, aesthetically pleasing because we still had that finished good look and at the same time it was really fun and relatable. A lot of our stuff was bold.

Ian: I think our aesthetics are quite advanced. I feel like spending enough time filming things and having to use those things you filmed later for something like a video or an album of pictures means you have a better sense overall about what's a good picture, what's a good angle, why you would want to save a picture. Stuff like that. And I think we understand technology a lot more now because we used it so much.

Both express feeling a sense of accomplishment as media makers developing their own visual aesthetics sensibilities. A sustained relationship working with media technology allowed them to become knowledgeable about it and adept at its uses. GGs actively engaged in working with production tools to create meaningful stories rather than being passive consumers of electronic media. Throughout several of the interviews they assert that the quality not only made these videos stand out, but also served to advance objectives for empowerment and educating the public.

Kierra: And it was hot! Compared to some other stuff. We would go to conferences and other people would be putting together videos but they weren't . . . sometimes the framing was off. I think we did a good job. Our stuff was top of the line. . . . We entered those film festivals and stuff but we were really using the media outlet to get our message across. And that's cool because if you have this piece of work that looks professional and people are, like, a bunch of teenagers did that, people of color did that, it destructs the stereotype. Yeah, we're talking about this activism stuff, but our shit is on point too. So it

gives us a little more leverage for those people who aren't as . . . it makes people maybe more receptive. They actually have those skills to put this together; ok maybe I'll watch this. We were using our tool to the best of our ability.

The attention paid to aesthetics and a high standard of quality was both a source of great pride, and a practical means for reaching a wider audience to educate them about social and environmental topics. This contributed to making digital storytelling an attractive and engaging practice for the participants while also fostering technological literacy and competence through the regular use of cameras and computers. The emphasis on making quality productions not only lent credibility to the message contained in the stories, but also served to dispel stereotypes.



Hands-On Learning Meets Media

A prominent example of the group's pedagogy of hands-on learning and digital storytelling involved the renovation of a small diesel bus and converting it to use waste cooking oil for fuel. After the interior was completely refurbished with nontoxic paints and new seats made from recycled fabric and soy-foam-based cushioning, the bus was converted to a mobile media center powered by a photovoltaic system GGs designed and built with assistance from a

local renewable energy business the group had a long-standing relationship with. The system was used to run a projector and sound system to show videos at outdoor events. The story of the work on the bus became the subject of the program's last documentary, *Green Grease Guzzlers*, which provided detailed instructions on both biodiesel production and waste vegetable oil fuel conversion.² It premiered in Detroit as part of the US Social Forum in 2010.

Che: I think it was really good to have both those sides, to have the documentation and the actual doing of the work. . . . But in a more deeper way there's something about getting your hands on these processes, and these processes are basically environmentally more sound things. Much like we were talking about rooting some of the curriculum in cultural practices makes it more real, well getting your hands on a bus and converting it from running on diesel to running on veggie diesel — that makes that really real.

Che was an adult volunteer for the first three years of the program. He brought with him a background as a filmmaker and a hip hop artist, as well as someone who had experienced alternative forms of education in high school and college, and had spent most of his childhood with his father incarcerated. His skills and experiences were valuable to the development of GGs, and he believed in the group's mission to offer a critical and experiential learning experience for the youth participants that they could relate to their own lives as youth of color growing up in Ithaca.

The youth participants found the emphasis on both research and practice to be beneficial to their taking ownership of the learning process and their sense of competency.

Kierra: It was open. What makes it unique is . . . it wasn't just you guys teaching, it's not like a classroom, it was hands-on so we would do our own research. Then when we would do our own research we could interpret it however we felt. And then we would have discussions about different things, and on top of that we would bring in our own personal experiences. So for me it was also critical. It wasn't just learning about one specific topic. I felt like I had gained a lot of ways to analyze different things and to use critical thinking to analyze different situations and problems.

Gabe: I would say it was very hands on. That's what really helped me to grasp everything. You know we would research something and then we would go apply it right away. Like I was saying earlier, with the cameras we would learn about the white balance, the shutter speed, the aperture and then we would go into the field. We would go to the wildflower preserve. That's where I would mess around — set the white balance, change the shutter speed, things like that. Also it was very . . . we wouldn't hoard the information. I would learn a lot. Like the movies we would watch, after that we would have the discussion and then I would go to my friends and I would talk to them about it. They would make fun of me [laughs]. Stuff like that, it helped to talk to them about it, cause we would go out and do the public speaking part of Green Guerrillas. That really

² An excerpt is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxdhEvkpfMI>

made me nervous, but that helped me with talking to people about what I do, what I like, what I'm interested in. The learning environment basically was helpful in making the information shareable. It solidified it. Provided a good foundation.

During interviews all of the youth alumni expressed that the learning environment fostered a high level of engagement while building their capacities to think critically with a holistic perspective. This was especially apparent when there were local issues that affected or had the potential to affect their lives.

Sequoia: I think it was open in the way that there was many ways that we learned. It was serious. . . . I think that's another step of really learning. When you really learn something you can do that shit in the moment [snaps fingers]. The fact that we ended up researching a lot of stuff ourselves and building our own research questions a lot of times, our own topics, we really wanted to learn the topic versus we have to learn this about fracking or whatever. I think a lot of times when we learn in more academic settings we're trying to get a certain thing versus the overall and being invested in and learning about it and how it connects to everything else.

Kierra: With Green Guerrillas it was different. Once we found out about fracking we were like oh shit let's research fracking. We had this plan, but let's research fracking today. And then there's gonna be this meeting at the State Theater where the DEC is gonna be there and you have two minutes to talk. Ok how do we come up with something creative? We had just learned about it but then we're using our critical thinking skills, the media skills to figure out a way to say what we want to say.

Youth participants became particularly concerned about the possibility of fracking causing major environmental harm in our area as they had recently become more deeply connected to local natural areas through a project that utilized high definition video cameras as a gateway to environmental learning and appreciation.

Nature and Digital Video Aesthetics: The Story of Ecocinema

After witnessing positive responses to outdoor field trips, it was decided to further develop cinematography and photography skills by creating opportunities for more direct engagement with nature and an appreciation for its beauty. The group acquired high-definition video cameras in 2009 and embarked on a project we called *Ecocinema*. It began with outdoor walks coupled with nature awareness exercises and games in order to heighten sensitivity to the nuances of nature. Then cameras, binoculars, and field guides were taken out to nature preserves, where GGs were encouraged to record anything they found interesting and aesthetically pleasing. They were tasked with gathering footage that would be edited into short videos with background music that would allow for a blend of natural and digital media aesthetics through the use of software filters and effects.



Several of the GGs related stories about their sense of accomplishment learning more advanced cinematography skills, while also enjoying being outdoors witnessing nature's beauty up close.

Ian: I remember almost falling into . . . I forget what lake it was, but we were shooting the very first Ecocinema. We were trying to go way deep into the woods and I was recording this ant climbing up a piece of moss I think. And I think we were looking at an eagle and trying to see. Everyone was yelling look, look it's there, someone get it on film! I don't know if the rock we were on was tipping or something, or something with the roots, but we nearly fell right off into the lake. It was pretty funny though. I loved doing the Ecocinema. That was awesome! Being out in the wild and trying to catch a bee on camera and stuff. Taking your time to notice the fractal and amazing nature. It's just beautiful. I think especially if you're cooped up in town all the time you don't really get a chance to think about the beautiful entropy of just nature and how things grow over each other and use each other in different ways. It's not right or wrong, it's just there. That's a vivid memory. . . . I really enjoyed that trip a lot. All the Ecocinema trips were awesome.

Maggie: When I got over the fact that I was surrounded by dirt [laughs] and surrounded by things — oh wow, insects everywhere! Bugs! . . . Everything was so pretty. I just wanted to capture everything. I feel like with Green Guerrillas was the one time thus far, even though it's been a while, that I've been out in nature the most. Even when I was younger, when I was a little kid and you're supposed to run around in the woods, I didn't really. But with Green Guerrillas I definitely got way more comfortable with nature.

Cause I always loved looking at it, but I always have an issue with being in it. Because we had to go out there to film and all, it got me comfortable with it, and I was really happy to be able to capture it all on camera.

Several expressed having to initially overcome their trepidation toward being outdoors for long periods. Ecocinema provided a vehicle for the GGs to develop and explore a personal connection with both the aesthetic and therapeutic aspects of nature.

Kierra: That was really fun. I will never forget, using the manual focus was such an accomplishment for me. . . . Just being out in nature first of all was always therapy for me. Getting away. . . . You could just look at it and enjoy it but it felt good to also use a tool to capture that.

Gabe: It was fun being out there. Besides being in Green Guerrillas I didn't really interact with nature too much. Being out there and actually filming it — it was two things at once for me. Because there's, one, I'm focusing on nature and, two, I'm focusing on nature through the camera. It's pinpointing what I'm really looking at. . . . I like the waterfalls. That was one of the favorite things for me to record. I didn't really know too much about nature at that point until I started going out. Now I go on walks by myself a lot. I go to the dams a lot and just sit there.

Throughout the interviews, positive memories of these activities were expressed. Their stories highlight how the tool of digital cameras, when coupled with excursions to local sites of natural beauty, was a way for them to become better media producers while accomplishing programmatic goals for environmental education.

The project had a significant influence on other community organizing and media production activities. As the issue of fracking was emerging in New York, the youth participants felt strongly about challenging it, not wanting to see the landscape they were learning to appreciate become despoiled. Kierra highlights Ecocinema projects existing in a holistic continuum with other activities:

We worked as a team. We all had different shots from different things and then Ian put it together into this nice looking piece. So the teamwork and doing it independently, having my skill that I used to put my little piece in there, it was good. That was the one thing about Green Guerrillas. Even though we were always talking about activism, social justice, and equality, some people may not grasp what we were doing. They may not understand we're creating dialogue talking about these issues and bouncing ideas off one another so that we can organize. . . . You do the organizing stuff but you also have something tangible there. So when we would go out and document, do the nature cinematography, it was good, you would have something tangible there.

Ecocinema introduced sustained contact with nature through the use of a familiar tool. The focus on nature aesthetics provided an avenue for participants to connect with the

therapeutic benefits of being outdoors. Though some expressed reservations at the start of the project (such as concerns about insects and being out all day in the summer heat), the positive expressions on their faces, as well as their relaxed demeanor at the end of each trip confirmed it was well received. The framework of having an assignment to go out and record interesting birds, insects, and plant life, as well as simply the opportunity to be at ease in an outdoor setting, was related enthusiastically throughout their interviews. While all of them expressed finding enjoyment in the activity, the fact that many of them report that they continue to seek solace in nature several years after the project, and they identify as a source of pride being highly vocal and active participants in an environmental campaign, speaks to the activity both addressing nature deficit concerns and fostering youth civic engagement.



Recognition as Storytellers and Change Agents

Many GGs interviewed express a sense of pride in having created digital stories that were enjoyed by others and that played a visible role in their community. Some of them mentioned feeling like they were on the cutting edge, or ahead of their time, in comparison to their peers because of what they were doing and learning. Getting public recognition and acknowledgment reinforced their participation in the program. The community screenings of the films they created were always a high point for everyone involved.

Kyrie: That was great. That was always great. It was such a rush. It was such an emotional rush to see that many people turn out for it. And to have that kind of support. . . . I think it's important to acknowledge how many people support the Green Guerrillas and to see how the community here in Ithaca stepped up and made sure that all of the participants had such a good experience. And that experience helped carry them forward in their lives and to be just better people overall.

Her response indicates that the screenings were especially meaningful events to her. She acknowledges that the high level of support from the broader community helped make them positive experiences that enhanced the GG's sense of self.

Che: I think that something that was cool was, when we were done and had our screening, a lot of the naysayers realized that what we were doing was good. . . . Which was external validation that we're doing it, we're doing the right thing. . . . Like they had just accomplished something [and] a bunch of people, including total strangers, "weird" grownups . . . the Ithaca community, showed up and was all filled with praise. . . . Again we're talking about youth that don't always get recognized for what their gifts are and don't always get any attention and very rarely get positive attention and get told, wow you did something good and you're good at something and you have ability and we're interested in what you can do. I was proud; I was proud of them.

Che highlights a key aspect of the group's purpose, which was empowering adolescents from marginalized communities. The group became a well-known fixture in the local area, stemming from the movie screenings, as well as a variety of public speaking presentations and "tabling" outreach at a wide array of community events. The acknowledgement and encouragement from peers and adults helped fuel and motivate their engagement with the program and the issues it dealt with.

Sustained Environmental Ethics

All participants interviewed expressed a sense of personal responsibility for the environment with most explicitly attributing that to participation in GGs. Group experiences

provided a foundational set of environmental ethics they still held several years after being in the program. Some spoke about an intrinsic connection between people and nature, along with a societal cognitive disconnection whereby many people don't think or care about environmental issues. They stressed the importance of ethical environmental attitudes and behaviors gaining traction with more people.

Patrick: Too many people [are] unaware of how they contribute to the destruction of the planet, so they keep on doing what they are doing. We must start informing the youth at a very young age and get them accustomed to recycling, solar energy, and eating fresh food.

He feels strongly other young people should be offered similar opportunities to learn about environmentally responsible practices as he had in the program. In his assessment, education and hands-on experience are crucial for fostering change. Another offers a philosophical perspective on the importance of human-nature connectivity and an ethical consciousness that could lead to less selfish behavior:

Sequoia: I think people should look at the environment and nature, hopefully like they're looking at themselves, and always being conscious and aware of it as a life form and really nurturing and taking care and holistically thinking about all the factors in life.

Several GGs expressed a sense of personal responsibility to carry on some of the practices they had learned in the program.

Maggie: There's something in me that snapped back in the day that makes me so like I can't not recycle something. I just kinda have to. . . . I do care about the environment and the animals because we only have one earth. We just have one earth. It sounds cheesy but it is what it is. . . . I do care, and I wish I could do more.

Other GGs state they do what they can to maintain environmentally conscious practices in their personal lives, while also being reflective that they felt there was more they could do as individuals. They express a mixture of hope and concern about the current state of affairs in the world regarding environmental issues. Several spoke to how the anti-fracking work had influenced their sense of ethics and agency.

Gabe: We're the ones who are supposed to do something about it. And we're the only ones who can do something about it. . . . It definitely made me feel like I was a part of changing it. I was doing something about it instead of just saying, hey we should do something about it.

From a continued dedication to being conscientious in their own lives and speaking out about environmental issues, all felt strongly about maintaining an ethical relationship with the environment. Hands-on experiences with nature, making videos about a wide variety of environmental topics, exposure to Indigenous people and environmental philosophies, and being

involved in the anti-fracking movement all contributed to a well-defined sense of their responsibility to the earth and coming generations.

Challenges

While there were certainly many successes that the group experienced, there were also a number of challenges. Substantive engagement with the program was not universal for all of the youth participants. We learned through experience that a certain level of maturity was required for the youth to be able to participate in media production and public outreach activities seriously. While membership in the group certainly seemed to provide a positive identity and constructive outlet for the youth, the adult volunteers were not social workers nor mental health professionals. We did our best to advocate for them while encouraging them to make healthy choices in their lives, but some did have trouble in school and one ended up going to prison after he left the group.

As with any small non-profit organization, bringing in sufficient funding to carry out programming needs was a never-ending process. GGs was situated as a job training program at a time when there was some funding available to subsidize employment for low income youth. We partnered with various agencies to provide stipends for the youth participants, as it was a goal of the organization for their work to be treated as valuable. However, with the recession of 2008 this became increasingly difficult, requiring creative fundraising approaches. The amount of work that was required of the two primary adult volunteers administering and operating the program was also substantial. Approximately a third of the participants would transition out of the program at the end of each summer and group-led interviews would find replacements. At the end of the summer of 2011, the entire cohort of youth, most having participated for several years, were ready to transition out. This, combined with funding difficulties and the need for the co-facilitators to take a break, resulted in the organization closing its office and going into dormancy.

Conclusion

The intention when GGs was conceived was to create a dynamic, engaging, and egalitarian learning environment where critical social and environmental consciousness could be explored creatively in a safe and supportive space with tools familiar to youth growing up in an electronic media-centric age. The participants were able to experience a synthesis of Indigenous and activist pedagogical influences, which they related as more appealing than their formal education. These opportunities for hands-on experience, social learning as a tightly knit group, intergenerational exchange, and mentoring provided an educational experience about a wide variety of subjects that the participants articulated was particularly meaningful to their lives and situatedness as youth of color.

GGs felt invested in the topics they worked on, leading them to take ownership of their learning process. Everyone in this study felt they were able to contribute to the shaping of the group's objectives and identity. Key parts of that identity that have stayed with participants are thinking critically and holistically, having a strong sense that their voice is important, and feeling

empowered to stand up for themselves and what they feel is right. Though not quoted in these excerpts, many of them spoke about the experiences and lessons they learned in the program helping them in their personal lives, as well as their academic and community work after they had left it.

Participants felt that their experiences with digital media in the program provided them with an educational opportunity that was successful because it was experiential and, by its very nature, through the inquiry aspects of research and interviewing, as well as the repetition of the editing process, reinforced knowledge. Another thread of this story is the sense of empowerment created for the youth participants through learning to find their own voice through digital storytelling and then recognizing their power to reach others through compelling productions. As they developed competence and moved into higher levels of accomplishment with their craft, they took pride in both their individual accomplishments at developing their media production skill sets and the aesthetic quality of their collective video work shared with the larger world. This dynamic of outside acknowledgement and self-empowerment allowed them to push back against others' low expectations for their lives. The feelings of accomplishment they gained from skillfully creating digital stories, which were recognized by a broader community, helped foster a positive identity as youth advocates.

The pedagogy of the program resonated strongly with participants and ignited a spark of engagement. In their estimation, having opportunities for self-directed, hands-on, and spontaneous learning was a refreshing alternative to their formal education. The use of multimedia teaching tools and discussions in the group's "Political Education" sessions fostered critical consciousness about environmental and social issues, as well as media literacy. Participants found the dynamic and organically evolving curriculum to be a stimulating and effective approach for learning about the complexities and interconnectedness of social justice and sustainability, particularly as those issues related to their own life experiences.

The participants related how digital storytelling served as an effective engagement point for the program's educational mission, as they found enjoyment and satisfaction in mastering the skills of digital media production. By being able to contribute to community awareness and policy decisions in unique and creative ways that resulted in positive feedback, their views of themselves as skillful storytellers and change agents were reinforced. Ecocinema provided a unique opportunity for utilizing electronic media tools to explore nature. The participants noted how the activity fostered an appreciation for nature and being outdoors, a new experience for most of them. They also expressed a sense of accomplishment in honing and enhancing their camera skills individually, while also participating in a collaborative artistic effort that combined the aesthetics of nature and digital media. Some of them enjoyed the relaxing benefits of spending time immersed in nature and still seek it out in their personal lives.

The story told here is not solely about media's potential for sustainability education but also about the empowerment, enjoyment, pride, and camaraderie associated with being a member of a learning community that sought to chart a unique path in the field of non-formal community-based education. The participants interviewed for this study express a strong sense of environmental ethics gained from participation in the program. The collectively constructed meanings for both the youth and adult volunteers resulted in a strong self-identification as being a "Green Guerrilla".

It should be noted that throughout the interviews they frequently used the words “we” and “us.” This use of a plural pronoun signifies a relationship with others. Together we learned a way of being that honors people, land, memory, knowledge, creativity, hospitality, love, and compassion while sharing openly with others in the hope of creating a more just and sustainable world. All of us continue to carry these experiences forward with a strong sense of ethics and responsibility to the world in our lives and work. The parent organization (STAMP) has recently evolved into a new name, Sustainable Indigenous Futures, and the Green Guerrillas bus awaits work to become a “green grease guzzling” mobile media center again.

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