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Integrating Teaching and Educational Cable  
to Enrich The Community, Campus, and Students

by Robert Huesca

The educational cable channel in San Antonio, Texas provides schools with a valuable, though grossly underutilized, resource for showcasing student talent, contributing to the academic curriculum, and enriching the local community. Though guilty of neglecting this precious resource, I recently had the opportunity to place the educational cable channel at the heart of a final assignment in a course on alternative media at Trinity University where I teach with beneficial effects for the students, the institution, and the local community. This article will briefly describe a class-produced documentary that aired on the local, educational cable channel before explaining the course itself and discussing how academic curricula might be used more systematically to enrich educational cable offerings.

**When I Dream Dreams**

*When I Dream Dreams* is a 20-minute documentary examining the social, psychological, and linguistic consequences of a Texas law that criminalized the use of any language other than English in the public schools from 1918 to 1968. The documentary, which aired on the education cable channel in March of this year, is based on interviews with local, Mexican American teachers, students, and lawmakers who worked and studied in the public schools at the time the law was in force.

The title of the documentary is drawn from a poem of the same name that describes the thoughts, dreams, and experiences of a student at Rhodes Middle School, which is located in a predominately Mexican American neighborhood where Spanish is spoken by many residents. The poem's author, Carmen Tafolla, recited the lines, which served as a narrative device that opened, closed, and appeared intermittently in the documentary. Woven between the poem's verses, interviewees describe their experiences:

- "I spent a lot of time in the clothes closet for speaking Spanish. I remember one time the kids went to lunch and the teacher forgot that I was in there. So I went and got my lunch and proceeded to eat it in the clothes closet," former student Ernesto Bernal.

- "I have a paddle with holes drilled through it, and it says, 'Board of Education,' and it's got kids' signatures and little strokes next to the signatures. The rule at the school was one stroke--a stroke was a hit with the paddle--a stroke for every word of Spanish," former student Carmen Tafolla.

- "Every Monday the school would issue you a ribbon, and on that ribbon it said, 'I speak English, I'm a good American.' And our students that were on the student council would walk the halls, and if I heard you speaking Spanish, I would take your name, take your ribbon away from you, and turn that ribbon over to your homeroom teacher, and you would get a demerit. That was the system," former state representative and senator Joe Bernal.

The sequencing of the documentary first establishes the context of the schools for non-English speakers, then explores the social, psychological, and linguistic consequences, and finally describes the means of overcoming the policy's damaging effects. The emotionally charged interviews variously elicit sadness, sympathy, anger, and hope, and they function as a document of historic importance in San Antonio where bilingual education continues to be debated.

### **School Curricula and Educational Cable Channels**

This rich and evocative documentary stands as testimony of what can happen when school curricula are integrated with the philosophy and mission of educational cable channels. This documentary was the product of a university course examining alternative media, where students spent the first ten weeks studying theories and philosophies such as democracy and communication, community media, and feminism. During this time they also examined alternative media exemplars such as fanzines, pirate radio, and public access and educational cable television. In the final six weeks of the course, teams were asked to produce an

alternative media video that was guided by some of the theoretical and philosophical contributions covered in the first part of the class.

Among the assignment's requirements was a distribution plan for the final video, and one group, the *Dreams* video, identified a community screening via the educational cable channel, among other options. One way of enriching the public access and educational cable channels further might have been to assign students to identify community producers who might have acted as collaborators in enhancing the final projects' distribution. Most cities have a core of local producers who are connected to institutions and issues and who have developed loyal viewers. In the future when I teach this course, I will probably design the assignment so that students are required to connect formally with local producers, who are typically very welcoming of partnerships with area college students.

### **The Role of the Documentary in Community Life**

Although the March cablecast generated little public feedback, the student producers have a larger conceptual frame of reference for thinking about the role of the documentary in community life. The student producers identified their work as an alternative video largely because of its content, which focused on a topic virtually ignored by mainstream media, challenged conventional views regarding public schools, and drew on voices that are excluded from public discourse. Furthermore, the producers enlisted the interviewees to play the role of storytellers, rather than to answer a list of factual questions in the style of mainstream journalism, and included lengthy segments that stood on their own, without the professional scripting of the omniscient narrator. In this way the students felt that some video agency was being relinquished by them and conferred upon the participants. One student wrote in her reflexive analysis, "Our video also very much interrupted traditional power codes--it enabled individuals whose values have been marginalized the opportunity to reclaim and reconstruct the portrait of their culture."

### **Student Producer Growth and Transformation**

Finally, the producers of this video described a feeling of individual growth and

transformation while working on a video that attempted to appeal to a broad community audience, while breaking away from mainstream documentary conventions. This self transformation came from enlisting interviewees to function as collaborating storytellers, which led to an expansion of the producers' consciousness that might not have occurred had they followed a more traditional line of documentary production. The educational cable channel, therefore, needs to be valued not only for its output, but also for its impact on production practices leading up to distribution and exhibition.

The educational cable channel in San Antonio has evolved into primarily a carrier of bulletin board announcements and canned programming of classroom activities and routine student productions, such as news and talk shows. This recent experience with a documentary of historic local importance demonstrated one way of enhancing the value of this resource by integrating it with a course that provided a thoughtful and challenging impetus to student producers. In the end, the documentary not only benefited the educational cable audience, but it enhanced the learning of the students who were trying to reach the public using some unconventional techniques and strategies.

Suggested Reading:

Branwyn, G. (1997). *Jamming the media: A citizen's guide: Reclaiming the tools of communication*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

Downing, J. D. (2001). *Radical media: Rebellious communication and social movements*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Harding, T. (1997). *The video activist handbook*. London: Pluto Press.

Rodriguez, C. (2001). *Fissures in the mediascape: An international study of citizens' media*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

#### Author Note

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#### Manuscript Note

This article will be presented in a White Paper session at the 2002 national conference of the Alliance for Community Media in Houston.

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