

A Testimonio on Developing Creative Thinkers: Creating Creators and Filmmaking in K-12 Schools

Hipolito Muñoz Navarrete, Creating Creators
Jessica Just, Creating Creators

Abstract

This article describes the Creating Creators Media Arts Program, a film pathway that uses cinematic storytelling to develop literacy, social emotional and other skills. The curriculum is designed to help students and educators experience an authentic project that mirrors the process of professional film development, production, and showcasing. The students and teachers are encouraged to produce stories from their own experiences, knowledge and perspective, stories that have not been heard before or that challenge dominant narratives. The curriculum is part of a multi-year pathway that allows students who want to pursue a career in filmmaking. Creating Creators supports the development of storytelling through emphasis on literacy as a critical, foundational skill.

Keywords: storytelling, curriculum, creators, counter stories, ethnic studies, filmmaking

Friday in a Santa Ana elementary school, a film course is taking place. It is Spring 2017 pre-pandemic times. Students of color were bustling to film the scene scheduled for the day. The 10-year-old producer was making sure the director had what she needed, then she headed over to the assistant director to make sure the crew was getting the camera, sound equipment and lights. The director then headed to the classroom where the filming took place. It took them around 20 minutes before the first take was done. The director was a little frustrated, the film teaching artist consulting with both director and producer, spoke loud enough so the rest of the crew and talent heard the conversation. It is a learning moment for the 4th graders, and also an opportunity for their classroom teacher to give guidance that will be reviewed at another time when production is not happening. Students were getting impatient as they noticed that time was running out, another film teaching artist reminded them that they need to be aware of time and that meant they needed to be prepared for execution and focus.

Students of color, emerging from low-income to working class communities were engaged in the process of creating what bell hooks called “counter-stories.” In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) delineates the stories of resilience and the transgression of racialized experiences that emerge as counter-stories and how this process can be an empowering environment for students when properly guided. Likewise, as Indigenous human rights activist Rigoberta Menchú (2010) reminds us, “personal experience is a reality,” placing personal testimonios and lived experience at

the center of telling our stories. Our students undergoing the Creating Creators framework tell their own counter-story *testimonio*.

This type of work, that we as educators and film industry leaders embrace, requires deep knowledge of the craft of filmmaking and instruction. Our classroom vision, “Learning to Learn Together,” guides us in the model we have cultivated from the beginning: supporting the development of life-long learners. The process has been designed with the student in mind, not only their ability but also their capacity. We employ project-based learning as a pedagogical practice that guides them to experience both competence, success, and failure in collaboration with industry professionals that can coach them through the demands of writing, reading, analyzing, interpreting, and most importantly, creating films.

This essay explains how the work in the classroom by Creating Creators Teaching Artists (CCTA) supports the development of student film projects. Creating Creators is a program that emphasizes creative exploration and provides professional opportunities for students. Since 2007, our collaboration with school districts and their classroom teachers have developed the literacy and creativity of their students to create an impactful project for them and their audience. We assert that our collaboration is not to add additional work without academic results, so we keep current with cutting-edge research in reading and best practices for teaching writing skills. A major goal is to continue supporting literacy after third grade, and to also dismantle the school to prison pipeline. We strive to inspire the enjoyment of learning by creating a culture where we can all learn to learn together.

The Program

Beginning in 2008, our program utilized filmmaking as a pedagogical tool for teaching in K-12 public schools. We had been asked before to assist students through workshops that connected them to culturally relevant pedagogy including language arts, film literacy, technology, visual arts and media. Building from these discussions, teachers had asked if we could formalize our workshops into a semester-long academic project that fused a practical process of filmmaking into K-12 schools. This endeavor led to a year-long K-12 program that is currently in place.

Drawing from educational materials, such as the National Reading Panel, over the last 15 years, we have developed a curriculum that continues to evolve in classrooms across school districts throughout the state of California. Over the course of a school year, students from a diverse range of backgrounds – first generation, English learners, undocumented, gifted, and talented – are paired with film professionals trained as Teaching Artists by Creating Creators. They produce short films, written, acted, directed, and



Figure 1. Mount Olive High School film academy students in production at a local restaurant. (Hipolito Muñoz Navarrete, 2023)

edited by the students. Since 2008, Creating Creators students have produced over 500+ short films and students have pursued higher education, as well as careers in entertainment and communications.

As the program has expanded over the years, we have sought to provide a pathway for students to seek out a college education and future careers in the film and television industries. Most of our participating students come from working class backgrounds, and face many obstacles that separate them from opportunity as well as access that other students from affluent families have. In inner city-schools, language arts programs have been hacked down to minimum or taken out all altogether. In our experience, we have found that culturally responsive pedagogy is necessary as a decolonial tool to support students in ways where they see themselves reflected in the curriculum and storytelling. To address this need, we also co-founded the Creating Creators Foundation to meet the demand of our youth wanting to pursue careers in media production. As a non-profit, the foundation ensures the development of the next generation of global citizens. As our collaboration with Group Effort Initiative and Cal State LA's College of Ethnic Studies and Chicana/o Latina/o Studies illustrates, our goal is to cultivate a collaborative project-based learning model that utilizes industry experts to teach our students real-life skills that move beyond rote learning.

Project-based Learning

Our pedagogy centers literacy through filmmaking as content and project-based learning experiences. School districts contract and entrust us with developing students and building capacity among educators by providing opportunities for professional collaboration in film production, which allows everyone experiencing our program to contribute to the arts. We provide scaffolded assignments that build academic technical skills, as well as knowledge that assists elementary, middle and high school teachers to get accredited as Career Technical Education (CTE) teachers. Our approach provides pedagogical tools such as a series of lesson plans, frameworks and professional development for teachers as a means of supporting their guidance of student projects. The process is also designed to give the students and teachers confidence through an authentic



Figure 2. Students from Monte Vista Film and Communications Magnet filming a scene. (Hipolito Muñoz Navarrete, 2023)



Figure 3. Saintly Film Academy students rehearsing a scene, Santa Ana High School. (Hipolito Muñoz Navarrete, 2023)

filmmaking experience by establishing a platform for co-creating projects and showcasing films at film festivals. As we collaborate with the teachers and students to design and produce their projects, we emphasize literacy development in storytelling. We are interested in developing strong narratives by emphasizing writing skills.

Creativity is an essential tool for innovation. Our program, as an exploratory project-based learning model, seeks to build creatives among multiple individuals – students, educators, and administrators – in school districts that are predominantly serving working class communities and first-generation students with limited resources. So how does one develop a creativity that can transform and revolutionize industries? The answer is complex, intricate, and challenging. Our experience as educators has taught us about the important role teachers play to prepare the youth under their trust to face the world. We encourage educators to also engage with each other to share successful teaching techniques.

Teachers strive to accomplish the task by turning their students' dreams into achievable goals. Managing 30 - 40 students is a Herculean task that requires classroom teachers to do things that most professionals in other industries are not asked to do, for an educator, teaching is just one of the tasks they are required to accomplish. For many folks who are not in a classroom and see instructional spaces as a mystery that they never solved while they were in school, they would be surprised how many schools are in their neighborhood trying to ensure that we have a citizenry that is competent, creative and with a solid moral compass. This seems like a lot to ask for a young person who generally begins teaching right out of college and takes years to figure out the footing, if they last that long in the classroom. Therefore, we see teachers, beginners or seasoned, as important carriers of inherent knowledge and experiences that are vital to education. As Yosso (2005) reminds us, people carry cultural wealth (aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital) and make important contributions to the community. We provide teachers with sample curriculum-templates and teachers decide which lessons they want to integrate. Some of the favorite assignments' teachers have selected include the importance of recognizing emotions as a tool for storytelling and nurturing vocabulary development through story maps and script writing. In the "Managing your Emotions" assignment, students are asked to stand in front of the class and act out an emotion for others to guess. The idea is for students to identify an emotion as an action which illustrates connections that are present in filmmaking.



Figure 4. Director giving actors feedback and directions, Martin R. Heninger Elementary School, Santa Ana California.



Figure 5. Test shoot for an acting scene. Norte Vista High School Film Pathway, Alvord Unified School District. (Hipolito

When our filmmaking courses are carefully structured and executed, the development of assignments and activities are guides to storytelling. We have observed how our pedagogical framework can have a deep impact on the social emotional learning, entrepreneurial and business skills for students, as well as support literacy and personal vision. The stages of filmmaking can be pedagogically sequenced and scaffolded into individual assignments throughout the academic year so that students can explore their own capacity to come up with ideas, develop them and lead a team to produce a film product. It takes many skills and a level headedness that requires self-awareness and agency. Filmmaking requires many crafts and skills to be executed in a tight schedule, and it also requires enough preparation time so that the creators can examine and create a timeline that they feel their project should take from beginning to completion. Those challenging conversations can help them understand how to set a tone of professionalism and open mindset.

The following lesson plan has been meticulously crafted to serve as a robust framework, dedicated to fostering professional development among Ethnic Studies educators in the art of designing highly personalized and culturally relevant curricula for students across K-12 grade levels. Through the implementation of this lesson plan, we have witnessed a profound transformational journey unfold, both for teachers and students alike. It serves as a powerful tool for educators to not only observe but also celebrate the cultural wealth that students bring to the learning table. This intentional approach not only highlights the diversity within the classroom but also empowers students to recognize and embrace their individual talents as critical storytellers. As teachers guide their students through this dynamic process, the classroom becomes a vibrant tapestry where every narrative, rooted in cultural richness, contributes to the collective growth and understanding within the educational community.

Professional Development Sample

The example below outlines a lesson plan designed for ethnic studies teachers, which can be adjusted for any educational level. This plan focuses on cultivating critical thinking, creativity, and empathy among students as they interact with digital testimonios, exploring various narratives and perspectives. This teaching strategy not only enhances students' engagement with the content but also imparts essential skills in digital storytelling.



Figure 6. Film students developing their scripts at Duarte High School. (Hipolito Muñoz Navarrete, 2023).



Figure 7. The final take of the short film "Apart," Martin R. Heninger Elementary School, Santa Ana, California. (Hipolito

Creating Creators Cinematic Arts Program
Lesson Production Basics - Part B

Talent vs Passion vs Craft

Objective:

As students experiment with the different roles in film production, they will be guided to pay close attention to which craft makes sense to them organically and what craft may be challenging but they feel compelled to pursue that craft as an option. The goal is to help the students understand their talents, their curiosity and the process of developing both.

Vocabulary:

Talent - Passion - Craft - Profession - Development

Project:

As the exercise is happening the Creating Creators Teaching Artists is guided to ask the students to pay attention to what makes sense to them naturally. Are they able to give directions clearly, calmly and inspirationally? Do they organically understand how to place the camera to capture the best frame for the story? Do they have insight into how the characters are supposed to feel and act during the take? Etc...

The process should help the students to understand their talent and be encouraged to harness that talent to its maximum and also to experience curiosity for craft that may be more challenging them and guide them to sources and professionals that may help them develop those skills.

Evaluation:

Students are evaluated by the CC Teaching Professionals by comparing the provided visuals so that the students can also see what needs to be corrected. Students are then asked to evaluate each other in order for them to develop familiarity with feedback and guidance.

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The Creating Creators process adapts an apprenticeship model that allows students to guide themselves in collaboration with their classroom teachers and the teaching artists, through their own work and how it connects to the overall project. We have developed a process that uses filmmaking as the content for literacy, executive and entrepreneurial development beginning at 4th grade. Implementing this process in elementary schools is complex, as an example, as we guide the students to mine their knowledge for the subjects that they want to write about, we also guide them to connect it to the simple sentence syntax so they can connect their intention to writing skills. Finding their voice means that they not only understand their perspective, but also can articulate it through oral voice or in writing in a way that others will not only understand, but also will be impacted and moved to action. We know that competence will elevate confidence and agency.

Conclusion

Counter storytelling emerges as a crucial pedagogical tool within Ethnic Studies and remains at the heart of our pedagogy. As a form of resistance and empowerment, counter storytelling challenges prevailing narratives and disrupts hegemonic structures, giving voice to marginalized perspectives. In the context of culturally responsive teaching, it becomes imperative to prioritize counter storytelling, not merely as a supplement to traditional narratives but as a foundational framework, especially for students of color. As bell hooks (1994) reminds us, intentional storytelling serves as a means of fostering critical consciousness, echoing, and deepening Paolo Freire's (1970) notion of education for critical consciousness in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Combined, both these works propel a framework that encourages teachers to engage students in questioning the nature of their historical and social context, placing a deliberate emphasis on perspectives often excluded from mainstream discourse. By prioritizing counter storytelling, teachers with an ethnic studies framework create a classroom environment that not only recognizes the rich and diverse experiences but actively works towards dismantling oppressive structures and fostering a deep, transformative understanding of sociopolitical realities.

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