

Youth Media: Invaluable and Life Changing

By Christine Newkirk for Youth Media Reporter, February 01, 2011

Chrystian Rodriguez is a youth-producer-turned-media educator who currently works at Global Action Project (G.A.P.) in New York City where he writes curricula, develops community relationships, and works directly with a new generation of filmmakers. Since joining G.A.P. in 2004, Chrystian has facilitated a variety of programs with young people from different communities as well as identity groups. He has also devoted his time to co-organizing youth film festivals, coordinating and facilitating media literacy, production and political education programs locally and nationally; specifically, in conferences such as the Grassroots Media Conference, the Allied Media Conference and the United States Social Forum. Chrystian is also a pop-culture guru and has begun research on the subject in educational environments during his time spent as a fellow of the Youth Media Learning Network. He is also very obsessed with zombies.

With nine years of media education experience behind him, Chrystian reflects on his experience as a youth producer, his youth media genealogy and career trajectory, as well as his future goals to open his own youth media organization one day.

YMR: Your first experience with media production was a call-in TV show hosted by the MNN Youth Channel in New York City. What did you gain from this experience and how did it impact your next steps as a media producer and educator?

Chrystian Rodriguez: I had an early interest in connecting politics with media. It came about during a media class at my high school. It offered me a new way to understand what's behind the media, its purpose and intentions. Even more than that, I started to think about the connection between filmmakers and what they are producing for an audience—what you want them to take away from the experience, the story, but also what you want your audience to take away about you as a filmmaker [and] your world view. My media class teacher took notice of my interests and recommended that I become a part of the MNN Youth Channel (YC); a youth media program within Manhattan's public broadcast channel. And so, I began working as a volunteer supporting youth in production while exploring my own cinematic/broadcast interests.

I quickly moved from a volunteer to producer. I co-hosted a call-in TV show that critiqued current films and engaged young people in discussions about movies. Youth Channel staff recognized my ability to work collaboratively with other

youth, beyond my technical skills, and so they asked me to become a peer trainer. Soon, I ran both technical and editing workshops for other YC participants. I enjoyed it but I was insanely shy, and so it was difficult for me because it was the first time I was in a leadership role and I needed to be able to facilitate and communicate in new ways.

YMR: Not long after, you transitioned to an executive producer role for “Defense Against Media Nonsense,” a role in which you taught yourself how to facilitate the production process with young people. In what ways did you grow through that experience? How did it change the way you view the world?

Rodriguez: Because the staff at YC was interested in my personal growth, they transitioned me out of the peer trainer position, and at age 18 I became the executive producer of a television show called “D.A.M.N. YC NEWS!?” (Defense Against Media Nonsense).” The experience was trial by fire and learning by doing and showed me that you have to grow into being an educator.

When I became responsible for producing—on my own—a 30-minute piece every two weeks, I quickly realized that the format was not going to appeal to a young audience. So I [led] a planning process with my YC peers. [The] vision and new format would soon be identified as an alternative youth news show. Being the point person was new to me—planning, coordinating committee meetings, and then managing production—and challenged me to bring my creative self to become an educator/media maker. Guiding the YC team [I had] to create a learning process for others. At this point there was no room for shyness.

YMR: Soon after you moved into an educator position at Global Action Project (G.A.P.). What were your first few years like? Did you find things that surprised, inspired, or intimidated you?

Rodriguez: I got exposed to NYC’s youth media landscape through the [Urban Visionaries Youth Film Festival](#), which helped me build relationships with many organizations and learn from their different approaches and missions. That is how I got to the [Global Action Project](#) (G.A.P.), a youth media organization that works with young people most affected by injustice in order to build the knowledge, tools and relationships needed to create media for community power, cultural expression, and political change.

During the first few years working as an educator there, I developed a new perspective on youth media. I began to see that it wasn’t simply about the production process, but also about exploring identity and helping young people understand for themselves the ways in which they are affected or oppressed by media messages. Most importantly, I began to understand how media could be

used as a tool for young people to think critically about the conditions that affect their communities and discover themselves politically.

The kinds of things that encouraged me at G.A.P. included stepping into a co-facilitator model, working in collaboration with another educator to bring our strengths and interests into the curriculum and our programs. A fundamental difference between co-facilitation and working alone is that, as a co-facilitator, you are in constant dialogue with another educator, negotiating facilitation style, communication, curriculum ideas, and hopefully, building best practices together. It also helps us become more accessible to the youth in the program because there are two adults to connect with. When it works, there is a stronger dynamic and peer analysis between facilitators about what young people need, what youth are bringing into the educational space, and how their experiences and knowledge can be incorporated into the media process. That also speaks to the popular education approach that G.A.P. uses.

There are two other things that I've been part of that have helped to shape my approach to this practice. First is that I play a key role in constantly revising and applying G.A.P.'s curriculum (<http://curriculum.global-action.org>), which means that I've taken on both staff development support for other media educators across the field through trainings and workshops. Most recently, I worked with folk to revise the structure of G.A.P.'s core framework. Specifically, we worked to make sure that we communicate through our curriculum both the oppressive and liberatory potential of media. It's the idea of praxis—that whenever there is oppression, there will also be people working for justice by identifying the challenge, taking action, assessing the outcomes, and following up on what's next that can lead to a victory. For us, the key component is the media's role in this process, for better or worse.

Personally, I have also worked to develop a way to include popular culture in an educational space. I've done this for two reasons:

- 1) Pop culture is a powerful force in shaping the way we think; and,
- 2) It is crucial to young people's daily experience—they are immersed in it—so educators must unpack pop culture with youth in the work we do.

I believe that as educators, we need to support young people in deconstructing pop culture without taking the joy out of consuming it. I had the chance to explore this idea through my time as a [Youth Media Learning Network](#) fellow by developing a workshop called “reframing pop culture.” The workshop was designed to challenge the universal concept of the “every man” hero reflected in mainstream media. By repurposing characters from movies such as X-Men, Spider-Man, and the Matrix, unrepresented communities like immigrant youth experimented with rewriting and structuring narratives to include their own stories and histories.

As an educator, I am continually learning. For each young person, what he or she takes away from the media production process is unique. There's no one approach, and no single outcome. I want to give young people some of what I gained through my experience learning media production and analysis at a young age.

YMR: Sometimes G.A.P. requires young people to have challenging or uncomfortable conversations in order to arrive at a new understanding of a social issue. Can you name one project that stands out to you as both trying and fruitful? What did you learn?

Rodriguez: G.A.P. does a lot of political education with youth in the process of making media and supports young people to think about media as a kind of political entity. This means that the workshops sometimes lead people into challenging conversations, as they understand the existing ideological and political components of media. In the beginning, there is often a lot of push back from the young people, particularly if they've never had these kinds of conversations before, as they start to see that the conditions they face are not random, but have histories and systems in place to sustain them. Everything is not always peachy. This is about critical thinking.

And while some conversations are difficult, they're also invaluable. And as an educator/facilitator it's important that you shape the space for these conversations to be productive and positive for the development of young people as individuals and as a working group.

For example, a few years back I co-facilitated a group that wanted to make a video examining the relationship between beauty standards and race. It invited a conversation about privilege among certain social groups and the lasting impact of colonialism on concepts of beauty closely related to Eurocentric standards. This was a challenging conversation to facilitate in a racially diverse group of youth who rarely get to talk to each other across race and identity about this kind of issue, especially for mixed race youth identifying as white.

The reason it was hard is not simply about "difference," but exploring identity through history, and supporting youth to critically reflect on who they are. The result was [Beauty and the Box](#), a sci-fi narrative that critiques media's role in shaping beauty standards. And while the final piece is not explicitly about race and beauty to the extent our conversations were, the process was essential to informing the piece—who they cast as the hero, and the contrasting worlds they created. Their relationships and conversations went way beyond the video and advanced the critical thinking in their daily lives.

YMR: What would you say to a funder that asks why youth media programs

are important for urban youth?

Rodriguez: By “urban youth,” do you mean youth of color who come from oppressed communities? If we’re talking about youth media in general, then it’s about providing tools for youth to represent themselves and their communities for the simple purpose of telling a story that is not often heard. It’s a way for youth to explore and “put their voice out there,” but that’s not all it can be. Not all youth media organizations are the same.

For example, at the Youth Channel I learned how to effectively develop and manage production for broadcast in a way that was youth-generated, and at G.A.P. we have a very specific social justice framework. So for a funder, these kinds of programs create ownership tied to youth history, experiences, and identities. And the reason why that’s important is because, as youth are immersed in mainstream media it affects their thinking and provides a space to question and build their analysis of the world. Ideally, it gives youth a way to align themselves with advocacy campaigns through the production of messages used for social justice.

YMR: What three things would you like every young person to walk away with after going through a youth media program?

Rodriguez: I would like young people to leave G.A.P. with the tools, resources and the knowledge to use media practices for their own use—whether or not ideologically motivated—to have access to a supported process of identity exploration. I’d like young people to understand that knowing themselves is a large part of the media production process and leave with the understanding that media is a large part of our culture and society shapes we do. I would like them to have a better state of mind about how to read the media that we’re fed every day, what we’re apt to understand as our reality, and be able to reflect, and question, and to have a critical distance from it.

[As educators, we must help youth] to understand a non-hierarchical model for media production—working collectively [as a] team to identify with and produce something that they can all connect with. When you build on an understanding about how work can happen in a non-hierarchical space, this can also directly be translated into our daily experiences in communication and working with other in our community.

YMR: What is your dream for the next ten years of your work in the youth media field?

Rodriguez: My dream for the next ten years? This is actually a question I asked myself not to long ago. I really want to be in a place where I will be working on

my own media projects specifically connected to my ideological beliefs. I also want to extend my experience and knowledge as an educator, providing professional development workshops and/or presenting in lectures available for other educators. [One day, I'll] create and manage my own youth media organization—a dream I aspire [to fulfill].