Training for Empowerment

by jesikah maria ross

This article focuses on the specifics of the vision of public access, and the point at which that vision moves into implementation: training. A few years ago, John Higgins conducted a study as part of his doctoral dissertation that investigated whether or not the vision actually does what it says: help citizens empower themselves through video training. The inquiry led him through an interesting maze of intersecting ideas that community television and media literacy proponents may find interesting.

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Empowerment: What is it? In doing his study, Higgins sifted through 25 years of literature related to public access produced by the alternative video movement, scholars, cable companies, government agencies, and research think tanks. In two and a half decades, all of these sources had talked about something called "empowerment," but very few had defined it. No one had really studied systematically whether such a thing as "empowerment" is a consequence of participation in the production of public access programs.

Editor's Note

Most of this article is adapted from **Visions of Empowerment: Media Literacy, and Demystification,** *originally published in* **Community Television Review,** *Volume 16, No.3 (June, 1993) by* **John W. Higgins.** *We reprinted edited selections from Higgins' original article since it is one of the few pieces in public access television literature that examines the Access vision through the lens of training and also defines empowerment within a community television context. The final section,* Training Methods for Empowerment, *is based on an interview with Higgins. To read Higgins' body of work on community television, see his web site at www.usfca.edu/~higginsj. We wish to thank John Higgins for permission to repackage and reprint his work.*

Granted, there is anecdotal evidence that something is going on that "looks like" empowerment. However, if public access to video communication is to survive and flourish, it will be necessary to provide policy makers with more specific documentation of its uses and benefits.

So what is the empowerment that is proposed by public access? In most of the public access literature, you have to read between the lines. And this sort of reading is much easier when the "vision thing" is put into a historical context.

The Vision of Public Access. In the late 1960s and early 70s an old idea—that some social injustices might be addressed by technology—was given a new focus: portable video. The idea went like this: With the new portable video equipment for program creation, and the emerging broadband cable television for a distribution system, the inequities of a monopoly-controlled broadcast media system would have to be addressed. Everyday people would have their voices heard through the electronic media, and others would be able to hear the rich diversity of perspectives their neighbors had to offer.

The "diversity of ideas" that was to be encouraged by public access also involved other utopian visions—in particular, that of individual and group empowerment. In this vision, empowerment meant becoming aware of one's self, others, and society, and after one had a "voice," actively working to influence society.

This empowerment was to take place, in part, through video production training. Learning to create television would demystify the media as individuals became aware of media structure and influence. Participating in the production of television programs would lead to a "visual literacy" as individuals learned how to "read" and "write" media codes. These skills would

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allow persons not only to become more discriminating viewers, but also to actively speak out in the media and shape their social world. Thus, they would discover their own "voice."

This vision of empowerment through public access video training was shared by practitioners, academics, and others. It is a vision widely accepted today—to the point that its assumptions are often considered sacrosanct, unquestioned within the movement itself. Critics, however, point to at least three problems with the public access vision: 1) the vision is too dependent on technology as a cure-all, 2) it does not address the necessary structural changes in society for authentic change, and 3) there is no real attention paid to the process by which the vision is to be implemented. Let's take a closer look at this third point.

Empowerment Defined. The underlying concepts of the public access vision of empowerment have much in common with the areas of visual literacy, media education, and critical pedagogy (see sidebar on page 23 for resources). In particular, the media education and critical pedagogy literatures 1) more fully describe "empowerment", 2) delineate the ingredients of empowerment within a video training context, and 3) suggest a direction for training methods which might help advance the concept of empowerment.

Based on the contributions from these sources, Higgins defined empowerment as similar to Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's "praxis": practice and reflection.

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Empowerment, therefore, consists of awareness, self-recognition, and action. This awareness includes a recognition of one's self, others, and society, and the power relationships involved within each as they intersect. Through self-reflection, a person sees how these relationships affect him or her. Recognition then leads to individual and/or group action to influence the personal and social realms.

Ingredients of Empowerment Through Video.
That's the vision of empowerment that emerges from the public access, media education, and critical pedagogy literatures. Within a video production environment, the concept becomes more concrete. The definition suggests that a trainee or producer is aware of mainstream and alternative approaches to the following elements:

- the technical elements involved in program construction (e.g., audio, lighting, editing, etc.);
- the symbolic codes that are behind this program construction (e.g., close up conveys the idea of talking face-to-face with someone);
- the values and beliefs these codes represent (e.g., talking close enough to stare into someone's eyes is socially acceptable);
- media structure, including ownership, economics, program distribution, and the organization of the production team (e.g., using a traditional top-down organizational model for the production group);
- the influence of media on society, and society on media (e.g., the impact of advertising and capitalism).

The definition of empowerment also suggests that, in addition to these cognitive elements, a trainee or producer should be able to recognize that all of these elements are human constructions and can be changed. Here is where the question of self-reflectivity enters: the empowered producer is seen as someone who also is able to position himself or herself in relation to the above elements.

For example: does the producer choose to reproduce the traditional means of video representation by consciously using established norms of video production? The rules sometimes reflect traditional values toward women, expressed symbolically. Where does she place herself with regard to these values? Does recognizing these rules and the values behind them, as well as her own relationship to the rules and values, lead her to lobby to change them in her video program? In her daily life? In short, does the process and content learned from working with video equipment carry over into other aspects of the trainee's life?

This is the construction of empowerment that Higgins worked with in his doctoral study, **Tracing The Vision: A Study of Community Volunteer Producers, Public Access Cable Television, and Empowerment** (1994). It is worth noting that empowerment is not something that can be given to another person; empowerment is a condition that originates from within the self. In other words, no one gives you a voice; instead, you find your own voice.

Training Methods for Empowerment.
How can we advance this concept of empowerment within our training programs? One way is by using teaching techniques and training strategies that encourage what Higgins calls "empowering moments": a time when the participant becomes fully aware of a new process, new skills, or a new way of perceiving the world. Empowering moments engage people in their own dynamic learning process, motivating them to continue to learn and apply their learning outside the Access center. What are some training methods that facilitate empowering moments? Here are a few suggestions:

Create opportunities for sharing. Sharing information, stories, viewpoints, and experiences with others who are different from you is a powerful way to gain new perspectives. Set aside time in your training for people to talk about themselves, what is important to them, what issues they are passionate about, or why they came to learn how to make TV. Hold debriefing sessions after different segments of your training for people to reflect on what they are learning and how they feel about it.

Encourage group work. Collective learning and decision making is important. It brings diverse individuals together to negotiate common understandings, forge common goals, and figure out how best to work as a team. These skills can carry over into other aspects of a participant's life. Group work provides trainees with the opportunity to meet and get to know others, feel part of a team, do something fun and different, and contribute to a project they think is important—all of which can be eye-opening experiences. Consider incorporating small group exercises or team projects throughout your workshops.

Use an integrated approach. Diverse training components accommodate different learning styles and engage participants on different levels. Combine equipment practice, critical viewing exercises, Access history lecturettes, and group work in your training. Get people's hands on equipment first. Give them theory and Access philosophy later when their heads are overflowing with technical information and they are ready to learn about something other than equipment.

Show examples of nontraditional television programs. Show as much alternative media as you can to give people a sense of the possibilities outside of mainstream TV. Use examples that reflect an Access perspective. Showing and discussing video clips is a great way to break up a workshop and lets people see and feel the difference between community media and mass media.

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Facilitate one-on-one learning. People learn primarily in one-on-one situations. To build skills, self-confidence, and interest, create ways for participants to learn from one another. In work-shop settings, divide the group into pairs and have each team do an activity where individuals complete a technical exercise and then show their teammate how they did it. Outside of workshops, designate a staff person to help trainees plug into existing crews or match them up to work on other producers' shows or with "mentor producers." The opportunity to share ideas and techniques with more experienced individuals promotes empowering

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moments.

Living Our Mission. Higgins' study reminds us that the transformation of the world was the vision behind the emergence of public access television and that this vision was to be implemented, in part, by empowering people through our video training programs. For community media to survive and flourish in today's changing telecommunications landscape, it is vital to demonstrate to policy makers how public access television actually facilitates empowerment and, consequently, contributes to community development. To do this, we need to articulate what we think empowerment is so that we can effectively design and deliver training programs that yield empowerment as a documented outcome. Higgins' work is especially useful here since it provides a definition of empowerment and gives us ideas on how to turn that definition into action. Reassessing our training programs and integrating methods that intentionally promote empowering moments will help ensure an effective and long-lasting approach to the social change envisioned by Access pioneers.

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Texts

Critical pedagogy is concerned with the content and process of teaching and learning. Its advocates are concerned with the connection between education and social change. Some books of interest to community access workers include:
Life In Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education by Peter McLaren (New York, Longman, 1989).
Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change by Ira Shor (Chicago, University of Chicago Press; 1992).
We Make The Road By Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change by Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (Philadelphia, Temple University Press; 1990).

Resources

"The Origins of Public Access Cable Television: 1966-1972" by Ralph Engleman (Journalism Monographs 123, October: 1990).
Public Radio and Television in America: A Political History by Ralph Engleman (Thousand Oaks, Sage; 1996).
Public Access Cable Television in the United States and Canada by Gilbert Gillespie (New York, Praeger; 1975).

Voices

progress. These evaluations yield both qualitative and quantitative information. Evaluation results are compiled and discussed by CTVN staff. If feasible, suggestions are incorporated into upcoming classes.

Hard Cover is an excellent opportunity for youth to work in all facets of video production. The show provides participants with production skills and community service experience. It contributes to fostering community development by encouraging disadvantaged urban youth to use the medium of television to voice their issues, find creative solutions to local problems, educate the audience, and create a better future for themselves and their neighborhoods.

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