

What Clicks and Sticks: A Career of Community and Media Arts Programs

by Judy Goldberg



Judy Goldberg in classroom at Instituto Quilloac in Cañar, Ecuador.
Photo by Judy Blankenship.

Once I heard a writer say that each day is like picking up a sword and hacking through the thickets. “I never know where I’m going, or where I’ll end up. But, if I just stop and turn my head to look behind me, there, in clear view, is a finely cut swath as far as the eye can see.”

My hope is that by introducing my trajectory and reflections, others will come to trust their instincts and follow them, like a farmer who stores the best ears of corn for next year’s plantings.

As I sit within a cobblestoned courtyard in Cuenca, Ecuador, this sense of the “cut swath” is reflected in all the places my eye can travel: the ascending stairway, the surrounding balconies with hanging ferns, and the groomed tangle of diverse greenery and blooms. Many possible paths, yet at each turn, one chosen. After decades of creating and implementing youth in community programs, I’m considering what of my own thicket thrashing can be instructive for youth practitioners, program organizers, educators, nonprofit directors, and youth participants. How has my unfurling path become less of a maze and more of a blueprint where others may find their own footing and make their own way?

What took years to realize is what kind of a learner I am. Schools immediately answer this question for us by structuring a kind of education whereby we develop basic skills to learn content from which we will be tested to prove we have acquired knowledge. For those who are successful at conforming to the academic rigors of reading, writing, discussing, and testing, this model may be effective. And for those who *get* it, accolades and confidence follow. Yet for someone like me, who I believe represents a wide range of students, conventional schooling is a mismatch. Learning comes

alive and relevant when I can learn by doing, initiating projects, applying creativity, and interacting with other students and community members. Learning through projects motivated me; believing my learning was part of a greater whole that could complement and fulfill the needs of others heightened my investment. Hence, my work in the youth in community field comes from a personal imperative to influence conventional systems of learning. I wish to weigh in on how education can better serve, if not celebrate, the learners among us who want their schooling to be participatory and socially relevant.

My Introduction to Project-based Learning: Foundational Organizations and Resources

Formative for me as a teenager was attending a presentation about [Project Piactla](#) at my high school. Slides of the Sierra Madres, faces of Mexican villagers, and the project's goal to teach self-sufficiency in health care released a magnetic force in me. I later found myself among a group of five students, trekking by foot and burro into remote villages to teach people how to brush their teeth. "Abre la boca, ¡mira, como así!" I would say as I brushed teeth inside a stranger's mouth. This could have ignited a dental career, but more compelling was a desire to work in Spanish-speaking communities, be useful, and uncover stories.



Students in the Youth Media Program. Photo by Katy Gross, YMP Program Director.

[Foxfire Books](#) and the field of experiential education were the next gravitational pull. The attraction to learn through human exchanges and active participation led to a few years as a wilderness instructor for teens who also responded well to this experiential learning experience.

Considering what presents itself and measuring it with intention has consistently steered my professional decisions. Upon completing film school at the Anthropology Film Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, I was introduced to a wild-eyed, mission-driven, entrepreneurial hippy looking for a production assistant for a one-day shoot to produce a PSA on needs of the elderly. This gig led to six years with the [Self Reliance Foundation](#) where filmmaking, community stories, and education came together. We produced documentaries about village life and sustainability in northern New Mexico. We wrote ancillary guides and led workshops in solar energy and technology at a local school. My first film was *La Querencia: A Homeland Facing Change*, using a folk tale about a cricket and a toad to convey cultural tensions between traditional values and modern-day pressures.

Youth, Community, and Learning: Always at the center is story

The merger of videography and teaching led to several years as an artist-in-residence. I taught video production throughout New Mexico, primarily with underserved Native, Hispanic, and disaffected youth. At each site the students determined what they wished to explore and communicate. My job was to awaken their imaginations and facilitate their story-making into images, voices, and sound.

Always at the center is story. Many of us claim this word "story" and I fear its cooption. Story provides a context for understanding human experience. It gives us vantage points to see others

and ourselves as characters within a series of events. Guiding participants to uncover personal narratives or conduct interviews creates a space of trust, enabling the person of focus to be heard. We all have stories of trauma and triumph and these are the stories we need to tell, the ones hankering to spill out. From an educator's point of view, story-making drawn from fieldwork (ethnography) seamlessly integrates academic learning, community building, and inquiry into the human condition. Story-making can activate learners' motivation to know more about places, history, and literature and how to assess contemporary life. As one 7th-grader articulated during an oral history project, "It's fun, so you don't even know you're learning."

The thicket is dense when you are the first to clear the trail. And my machete was additionally heavy, as I carried a lion's share of self-doubt. Yet, there was something greater than myself at play. Maybe what kept me going was that initial pull to adventure that claimed me early on and only now can I affectionately say, won out.

Encouraging the creative light to shine in others is contagious, but how does one make youth in community programs viable? Essential are relentless tenacity (or call it crazy persistence), the ability to articulate how participants benefit, ceaseless grant writing, schmoozing, and an ability to ignite the vision in others. Seizing the slightest crack in a door is imperative. Balancing what to pursue, sustaining the work at hand, and forming new relationships require a juggler's rhythm. Expanding a plan to welcome others' ideas and remaining open to what appears is also a must, as it often is better than what you initially imagined.

During my 40s I established a media business, Viewpoint Productions, unwittingly affirming a freelancer's life of uncertainty. I was teaching video as an adjunct faculty member at Santa Fe Community

College and producing videos for public and private entities when I was asked to work on a documentary about the New Mexico [Farm Security Administration \(FSA\)](#) photographers for an exhibition at the New Mexico Museum of Fine Arts. This project was the game changer that marked the shift from managing multiple projects to dedicating my career to educational community programs. [Drawing from the Well: Connecting School to Community](#) and, later, the founding of the nonprofit [Youth Media Project \(YMP\)](#) formed and engaged the pedagogy to teach and practice the craft of digital storytelling and the art of listening for a socially responsible world.

Drawing from the Well uses a "well" metaphor as a framework for an interdisciplinary, community-based, oral history curriculum. From my years in northern New Mexico, where I lived in a one-room adobe and drew my water from *la noria* (a water well), the idea of pulling up the stories to nourish the community was a natural extension of my work with the Self Reliance Foundation and the FSA video project. We had taken the FSA photographs to their places of origin to ask residents (many had been my neighbors) to tell us about the people, traditions, and events during the time of the Great Depression. These same photos became invaluable when starting Drawing from the Well in the same community, where we asked students, "How is life different today, compared to life half a century ago?" The photos triggered students to imagine, compare, question, and write stories about their community. Middle-school students worked in teams to investigate their personal heritage, folklore, traditions, celebration, and lifestyles. This led them to interview, record oral histories, edit, and present back to their community stories and insights. New intergenerational relationships and new ways of learning and demonstrating knowledge about history, Spanish, language arts, and communication skills surfaced. The State Historian's Office adopted Drawing from the Well as a means to gather community stories.

Nuts and Bolts for Designing Community Media Learning Programs

Planning

The [Drawing from the Well Curriculum](#) offers an adaptable framework for youth in community programs. Media production and making a digital story can galvanize students' focus and energy, creating a positive learning experience. Metaphors, such as *La Noria* (a water well), which was foundational for this curriculum, can serve as a template for planning a project's progression. The 4 P's outline the straightforward approach:

Pre-production,
Production,
Post-production, and
Presentation.

The more youth are in charge, the greater the learning and the gain.

Assessment

What does "success" look like when using media to engage youth in community? When creating community media projects, align with colleagues, existing programs, and educational institutions for ongoing beneficial impact. In today's competitive grant-funding world, forming meaningful partnerships with schools, colleges, nonprofits, populations with specific needs, and community issues is essential. Being inventive, creative, replicable, and scalable helps, too.

The following objectives and goals were critical to defining successful projects. At Youth Media Project they were remembered as the 4 Cs:

Collaborate with active and committed partners for participants to

Create digital media to

Communicate about social issues for positive social **Change**.

We learned to design and evaluate all our projects using these guideposts when writing proposals and contracts, creating curriculum, building schedules, critiquing youth productions, and reporting assessments.

YMP built upon the successes of Drawing from the Well. Applying the model of collaboration with existing educational programs—schools, colleges, and service organizations—YMP activities revolved around producing a regular radio show, now called *Audio Revolution!*, to focus on youth-related issues selected, represented, and crafted by youth. As time progressed and ongoing contracts with educational institutions grew, YMP established an internship program, whereby college students and graduates (many through AmeriCorps) used YMP as a laboratory to practice their craft of media production and to mentor students. My work shifted from serving as a practitioner to founding and directing an organization. This required new skills in development, management, and administration.

After 35 years of designing, coordinating, fundraising, instructing, and finally hiring talented staff, I needed to refuel and reconnect with the reasons I had "picked up the sword and begun my thrashing." Last year I was granted a sabbatical from YMP and set out for four and half months with my husband [Thayer Carter](#). I called it the *Plan Sin Plan*. We chose Ecuador with a little more than a spin of the globe—a family connection, attraction to diverse landscapes and cultures, plus a return to learning Spanish drew us there. During my sabbatical I began imagining an extension of YMP's internship program to include an international component; the zeal to run an organization had waned. Thankfully, in my absence, new leadership was emerging. I returned to YMP with the satisfaction that my work of launching and sustaining the organization was complete. I was ready to spread my wings.

While in Ecuador, thanks to colleagues with whom I had made the FSA video, we were introduced to [Judy Blankenship](#), a documentary photographer and author who lives half the year in Cañar, Ecuador, with her husband Michael Jenkins. Judy had established an extensive archive of photos and oral histories of the indigenous Cañari people. When visiting Judy and Michael, Judy presented a proposal:



Voces Project. Photo by Judy Blankenship.

Media Learning Models

Many wonderful radio and video products are available online. Here are some of my favorite radio stories from YMP participants. They also represent successful educational partnerships:

[A Remarkable Listener](#)
[Palestinian Hoop Dreams](#)
[We Youth](#)

For a video demonstrating process more than product, go to this [YMP Sampler](#).

[Voces de Cañar/Cañarikunpa Rimay](#) is an emerging intergenerational, transnational digital storytelling exchange steeped in community identity and learning. Conceived this year, the website is beginning to be populated with radio segments, photographs, posts, and videos. Check out [Dia de la madre](#) for a youth in community sample. [La marcha](#) captures an event.

The impacts of authentically and ethically connecting learning, service, and youth continue to grow. [Kichwa Hitari](#) is an online weekly live broadcast for the Kichwa-speaking Ecuadorian community. Since April they have been broadcasting our bilingual (Kichwa and Spanish) Voces de Cañar radio segments through [Radio el Tambo Stereo](#) in the Bronx. Our first video segment about Carnival was screened in April at [Bronx Rising! Hawari](#) at a POEMobile event with [City Lore](#) and the [Bronx Music Heritage Center](#). We've conducted classes with journalism students at Cañar's bilingual Instituto Quilloac, with exercises from Drawing from the Well, using Judy B's photos to trigger students' creative writing and audio recordings. We're coordinating with [Radio Ingapirca](#), a Cañar station, to broadcast edited versions of our Cañar pieces and Kichwa Hitari commentary. To date we've produced stories about local festivals, a march for International Workers' Day, and a Mother's Day segment including messages and music from a youth ensemble. We're finishing a segment featuring the Quilloac students' Kichwa poems. They'll be ready for another upcoming POEMobile event in

How would I like to assist in the indigenous Cañari archive work? She had just learned that the archive would eventually be part of the LLIILIAS Benson Latin American Archives and Collections at the University of Texas.

And so, the story continues....

We learned that the third largest concentration of Ecuadorians in the world live in New York City, and 85 percent of the families in Cañar have family there. Thanks to folklorist colleagues Suzy Seriff and Laura Marcus Green with whom YMP co-created outreach programs with the Gallery of Conscience at the Museum of International Folk Art, the idea of an exchange and potential partnerships were suggested. I took an exploratory trip to NYC to see if the pieces would snap together. Forming this transnational digital storytelling exchange has been like following the yellow brick road and landing in Oz.

Since March 2015, a team of us in Cañar have been producing audio and video segments for [Voces de Cañar/Cañarikunpa Rimay](#), a digital storytelling exchange between Cañaris in Ecuador and NYC. Our transnational professional team is exploring within our respective communities how traditions, cultural heritage, and contemporary life find new forms of expression and adaptations when one culture resides in two locations. The impact of migration, including how family and cultural ties are sustained, balanced, and transformed, underpins this project.

NYC. And we're seeking funding to expand the impact and reach of our work to build community through creating media.

The challenge of sustaining collaborative community programs is exceedingly more difficult. The world of Common Core standards and mandatory testing is leaving less room for innovation and community engagement. Finding funding support through grants and fundraisers to maintain programming and job security is, well, like relying on a spinning roulette wheel to land consistently on your number. Yet youth, youth providers, and youth organizations are hungry for engaging community media programs, and this work fulfills a niche in afterschool, summer, and weekend workshops. Story-making has the capacity to set those in danger of falling through the scholastic cracks back on track. And nonprofits and businesses are all interested in having their stories told and posted online. The rewards from community story collection, the positive impact for nonconventional learners, and the potential for creative story-making are boundless. If you're an irrepressible sword-swinging adventurer, then I say sharpen your tools, get to know your particular jungle, and blaze (or widen) an inter-connective youth, community, and education trail.



*A Theater Arts graduate of UC Santa Cruz, with post-graduate work through Temple University at the Anthropology Film School in Santa Fe, **Judy Goldberg** has devoted her professional career to the production, dissemination, and training of place-based digital storytelling programs for public radio and TV broadcasts. After decades of independent media production and education, she became founding director of Youth Media Project and is currently coordinating Voces de Cañar, an independent extension of this work.*

Judy Goldberg in Alausí, Ecuador. Photo by Thayer Carter.

Sidebar URL citations

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Classroom Application: Four Tips for Youth and Community Programming

From a lifetime of working within the youth in community field Judy Goldberg shares some proven tips for designing and evaluating successful projects.

Central tenets to youth in community projects are to encourage participant-driven inquiry; represent local, intergenerational, and diverse voices; and orchestrate engagement and feedback about themes of import.

1. At the beginning, affirm committed and active partners. Too often I took “Yes, let’s do this” to equate to engagement by fellow educators. Identify roles, responsibilities, and schedules. For projects with high schoolers, once a week isn’t effective. There are too many chances for students to miss a session and get behind. If you’re working as an independent educator/producer, the institutional contact person needs to provide continuity and engage with students throughout the project.
2. Agree on outcomes and creative products, although they may change as the project progresses, so that expectations are grounded in activities and production. This work requires attention to the learning process and product delivery simultaneously. It’s easy to get excited about possibilities and promise more than is feasible in a given timeframe. Just accept, *there is never enough time*. Scale deliverables appropriate to time constraints. Media production is labor intensive if editing is involved. Live performances take rehearsals and scripts. Be flexible and size up the situation as changes occur. Establish your communications styles and discuss how to have conversations and evaluate along the way with partners.
3. Challenge participants to develop specific, yet complex topics to make for compelling media. Choose media literacy segments relevant to students’ projects and identify triggers to ignite content development and increase production quality. Tools for shaping inquiry and honing dynamic forms of expression include free writes, web-brainstorming, photographs, objects, folk art, folklore, and writings. Bringing in community knowledge bearers, professionals, movies, and other youth-produced media are other tools. Final projects can take the form of personal narratives, interviews, spoken word, commentaries, documentaries, music compositions, radio dramas, and broadcasts—pre-produced and live—photography exhibitions, books, articles, artwork, live performances, videos, social media, blogging, internet distribution, portfolios, and community events.
4. Integrate venues for presenting participants’ final projects into project designs. Invite audiences and provide snacks. Provide a space for reflection and dialogue to engender compassion and appreciation for the power of story and the art of listening.