Media Lab Project, Santo Domingo Petapa, Oaxaca, México.
Brandeis University
Jefferson Arak, USA

Project Summary

  This project was conceived by Jeff Arak (USA) and Maricruz Juárez Cabrera (Mexico) over the course of six months and implemented during the summer of 2007. It consisted of the purchase of a small set of video production equipment in the USA, and the implementation of video production workshops (with a strong emphasis on community-centric documentary work) in the town of Santo Domingo Petapa, Oaxaca, Mexico. My arrival in Oaxaca was set for July 6, and we gave ourselves three months (until October 1) to publicize the workshops, plan the structure of the classes, and hold the actual sessions. By the date that I am to leave Santo Domingo, we will have held 13 workshops each lasting approximately 4 hours in length. The workshops consist of discussions about documentary film making, community and activism; hands-on exercises designed to further these discussions and also develop a photographic and narrative eye and ear; and technical lessons regarding the operation of the various pieces of equipment that we use to work on the short videos that each workshop members will have completed before October 1. Members are allowed to work as individuals or in small groups. The resulting videos will be screened in the town park or to a specific audience depending on the desire of the filmmaker.

  The goals of the project are to imbue among the workshop members an understanding and appreciation for documentary film making, in both the production and consumption of documentary material; technical training in the operation of video production equipment; experience in realizing personal projects; practically connecting the production of videos with community building and social commentary.

Project Results

  All of the above goals were met during the course of the project. The project suffered due to our limited equipment, lack of participation on the part of the youth group that we were originally to work with, and the subsequent awkward timing of the workshops.

  The funds that we had available to us could only buy one of each piece of equipment (camera, computer, tripod etc…) which severely limited the progress of the personal projects. Luckily, many people had cameras that were available for filming, but time on the computer had to be reserved.

  The first week of August in Santo Domingo is dedicated almost entirely to fiestas during which nobody works. This was a period of time during which we were attempting to advertise our project to the general population of Santo Domingo, after realizing that the members of the youth group that were originally involved with the project were no longer going to attend the workshops. These two problems led to our classes being generally crunched into the end of our planned timeline. Nonetheless, our twelve students are currently rallying to finish their personal projects in the next two weeks.

  Regarding the timing of the project, I think it is valuable to say here that three months to enact (and conclude) a project of this magnitude is hardly enough. In the future, having a date by which the projects must terminate should be considered unhelpful. The funds are limited and provide a deadline in themselves. In other words,

sustainability requires time, and one summer severely narrows a project`s options for sustainability.

Implications

Originally, this project was proposed as a "project for peace" because of the disconnect between indigenous towns in Mexico, and the larger non-indigenous Mexican population. It was thought that providing audio video production equipment and training would help the members of Santo Domingo Petapa reflect their own realities to México (and beyond) rather than have their realities ignored or distorted by outsiders. What I found, however, is that communication between indigenous and non-indigenous populations is not as high a priority for the members of the workshops as I had previously imagined it. What really became the aim of the project was imic (from within) documentation and presentation of Santo Domingo to its own population. A polarized view of México as indigenous and non-indigenous is faulty in many ways, not the least of which is that there exist substantial divisions *within* towns like Santo Domingo Petapa. For example, over the last thirty years, partisan politics have begun to replace the traditional general assemblies used by indigenous towns. In Santo Domingo Petapa, four parties dominate the political scene and divide the population between families and neighbors. During brainstorming sessions, it became evident that these divisions (not only political ones) were on everybody's mind. In terms of promoting peace I would say that the project has grown to become something much more useful than it would have been under its original auspices. Indeed, a united and unified population from my experience has a much better chance to interact peacefully with its neighbors as well.

Through my contact with the NGO, "Ojo de Agua Comunicación", and through working with a group of young people in managing Santo Domingo´s community radio station, I became more and more aware that indigenous communication is an extremely multifaceted phenomenon. Firstly, like the term "indigenous" itself, its existence was imposed by outsiders. Secondly, there is no one way to do it. Unfortunately, the media that we are used to interacting with in our lives usually has lucrative goals. At its core indigenous communication is about uncomercially mediated communication that exists because of the message it carries. Like any culture, indigenous populations need to transmit and consume information across generations and through space. Audio visual technologies have become another tool available for this transmission and consumption.

Following the conclusion of this project in Santo Domingo, the remaining members of the collectiva nueva era (The New Era Collective) are hoping to continue their communication initiatives (both radio and video in addition to mural-making) in both their own town and its outlying villages, known as *agencias.* We have already submitted a proposal to the state organization PACMIC, asking for funds to continue teaching workshops to new members of nueva era and to the populations living in these *agencias*.

In conclusion, this project has contributed to the appropriation of lucratively designed communication technology for community strengthening and cultural preservation. Its legacy is one of hope and peace. In continuing this work, Santo Domingo has yet another tool in attempting to stem the tide of cultural erasure and de-valuation of indigenous traditions including work, pastimes, dress, marriage customs, kin structure, migration, music, storytelling, social interaction and language. So as a representative of the population served by this grant, I offer my thanks for your help. Dis`kixu li.