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The Media Academy: Engaging Students in Meaningful Work

One California high school is motivating at-risk students by giving them the opportunity to produce school publications.

Fremont High School in Oakland, California, has created the Media Academy, a school-within-a-school, to increase the engagement of at-risk black and Hispanic students. The Media Academy offers these students skills and work experiences related to occupations in the print and electronic media. Students who enroll in this program must "major" in journalism for three years while taking the regular contingent of courses required for graduation.

Steve O'Donoghue, the lead teacher, was director of the school's journalism program before creating the Media Academy. He and his colleagues believed that exposure to occupations in the field of media and the opportunity to produce award-winning school publications could provide incentives for alienated black and Hispanic students to stay in school. These teachers modeled the Media Academy on the Peninsula Academies, innovative schools in California that offer three-year training programs in broad vocational fields such as electronics, banking, and health services. A core of four teachers has assumed responsibility for developing and teaching courses related to print and electronic media. Students in the program fulfill other graduation requirements by enrolling in classes throughout Fremont High School.

Established in the fall of 1986, the Media Academy enrolled approximately 50 students in its entering sophomore class. All but two of these students continued with the program as juniors during the 1987-88 school year; they were then joined by a new group of 50 sophomores.

Academy Activities

Members of the Media Academy make up approximately 90 percent of the staffs that produce the school's publications: the school newspaper, the yearbook, and a Spanish/English newspaper distributed to neighborhood residents. In addition to school-based experiences in media production, Academy students are provided with regular exposure to production operations at local newspapers and radio and television stations. An advisory committee composed primarily of executives from these businesses offers technical assistance to Academy teachers and summer internships to students.

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Because the tasks required to produce a newspaper are varied, students with different talents can succeed. A student may not be a strong writer, but he or she may be skilled at layout or at soliciting advertisements. Such work is as important to the success of the newspaper as the efforts of more academically inclined students. Academic achievement is thus not the sole criterion by which teachers evaluate student performance: the Academy makes it possible to cultivate strengths rather than regret weaknesses.

Motivating Factors

Newmann (p. 34, this issue) suggests that students want to learn for five reasons: a need for competence, extrinsic rewards, intrinsic interest, social support, and the experience of ownership. The Media Academy provides all five sources of engagement.

Competence. The Media Academy creates an environment where competence is recognized and directed toward the creation of socially valued products. The Academy helps students achieve more than just academic or occupational forms of competence; students speak gratefully of becoming more personally competent as well, of finding themselves more outgoing and confident after several months in the program.

The program's three-year development of writing skills allows students to

see the evolution of their competence. And because that development is set in the context of a collective task like producing a newspaper, a setting where teamwork pays off, students can develop other competencies as well. They learn to become proficient interviewers, photographers, public speakers, editors, and managers. Novices when they enter the program as sophomores, they advance to positions of leadership and responsibility as seniors.

Extrinsic rewards. The Academy offers a direct relationship between learning and future occupational or educational possibilities. Teachers make this relationship clear to students by bringing in media professionals, many from minority backgrounds. These speakers describe the training and skills required for their present occupations and the nature of their jobs; they often teach short courses in topics related to their field of expertise. Field trips to local newspapers and radio and television stations further contribute to students' images of possibilities. Students also recognize that developing the ability to write well will help them if they choose to attend college.

Students derive immediate benefits from the program as well. By being associated with the school newspaper and the Spanish-language community paper, they get to see their work in print. Articles submitted to a Youth News Service at a local radio station may also be aired. Public distribution and recognition of student work can be a powerful motivator for persistent effort in tasks requiring thinking and writing.

Intrinsic interest. The lively atmosphere at the Academy is appealing; students perceive the Academy as a place where exciting things happen, and they want to be "part of the action."

Media Academy activities often take students beyond the school into new social, occupational, or geographic environments. In addition to visiting media establishments, students attend statewide journalism conferences held in places like Yosemite National Park. Thus the Academy often gives students their first opportunity to stay in a hotel or visit the mountains.

Photograph by Kenny Wong



Further, teachers shape their presentations of content to emphasize its pertinence to students' lives and its application to learning tasks. The four core teachers coordinate their teaching across subject areas. For example, lessons in English and history often draw on skills being developed in journalism, as when an assignment related to the study of *Julius Caesar* required composing newspaper accounts of events that led to Caesar's assassination. Teachers also concentrate on presenting topics relevant to their students. A discussion of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, for example, incorporated current news articles about contemporary "native sons." In addition, teachers encourage students to write about personal concerns such as abortion, drug abuse, date rape, and reverse racism. Their personal knowledge and experience are used as a foundation upon which the analytical skills of writing and argumentation are constructed.

Social support. The Media Academy's success is tied to the way student work is placed within a positive social context. Students and teachers become a team where cooperative effort has benefits for the group as well as for the individual. Academic tasks at the Academy are often collaborative: individual effort contributes to the creation of a group product. In this way the isolation, separation, detachment, and fragmentation characteristic of conventional schooling are overcome.

That students remain in the program for three years contributes to this process of interconnection. Academy students form deep and sustained relations with teachers and peers; by working together, youth and adults get to know and support one another. One student, who had transformed his grades from C's and D's to A's and B's, stated: "I had never experienced this before—where the teachers are close and encourage me." Such attention can be a critical factor affecting whether students choose to stay in school or pursue a program. Sharing tasks can also lead students to form a strong peer network that values rather than disparages academic engagement. Another student remarked, "No one is put down for doing well in subjects."

Ownership. Academy students are encouraged to assume ownership of the program and its products. They are given significant leadership responsibilities and wide latitude in their choice of news articles and editorials. Teachers help produce the Academy's newspapers but avoid tight direction. Students perceive the program as their own, and with this sense of ownership comes the commitment that underlies engaged learning and work.

Engaging Students in Their Own Learning

In these five ways, then, the Media Academy succeeds in leading formerly unmotivated students to become engaged in their own learning. The program's success does not stem from its specifics, however, but from the general principles it follows. Underneath the Media Academy's specific curricular content lies an orientation that is transferable to other settings. By offering schoolwork that students find interesting and rewarding, activities that provide social support, and opportunities to succeed in academic and nonacademic areas, other programs should achieve similar success in engaging minority students in their education.□

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