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Causes Mini-Film Festival: Anthropology for Public Consumption

Matthew Richard and Andrea Zvikas

Every year in my Socio-Cultural Change class, I (Matthew Richard) include a requirement for an applied component, usually in the form of a group project that gives students an opportunity to apply what they are learning in class to the world outside the classroom. While I try to include such “hands on” exercises in all of my classes, I feel it is especially important to do so in a course with the word *change* in its title. In my opinion, an alluring title like “Socio-Cultural Change”—implying as it does either a gain of insight into the process of historical change, or the capability of bringing about a desired change, or better yet, a combination of both intellectual understanding and practical application—demands that we deliver on this extravagant promise. In addition to imparting the fundamentals of our subjects, we professors occasionally need to reward our budding social scientists for putting their faith in us and for committing to our academic disciplines. There’s no better way to do this, I feel, than with a successful application of the subject matter. For me, this means giving students of Socio-Cultural Change the opportunity to apply their developing understanding of social forces in order to bring about transformation in our society. It’s that simple.

Over the years, my students and I have made some bold attempts at making a difference, including the following ones: We made a documentary film on police brutality in our town (Richard 2002).

We surveyed the local NGO community and wrote grants on behalf of those we most admired. We did a survey of the visual content of our local newspaper over a 50-year span to determine whether race/class/gender biases were regularly depicted in the paper. And we examined how globalization was impacting our very vibrant community. These various projects always culminate in a public forum at which we share our findings with members of the community. Engaging the public and putting our knowledge to the test are nerve-racking, but gratifying, experiences for my students and me. In sharing our findings—and sometimes debating them—we feel that we are contributing to our community, and in this way, both our scientific curiosity and our humanistic urges are satisfied. I believe this double satisfaction is the reason that many social scientists are drawn to the field. The use of anthropological analysis to connect with the masses in the hope of addressing and alleviating persistent social problems is the hallmark of what has come to be called *public anthropology* (Borofsky 2007). This was the response to the widespread perception of anthropology as being among the most esoteric fields. From the 1960s to the 1990s, critics within anthropology itself charged that we wrote almost exclusively for ourselves, that we wrote books that engaged very few readers (just a few thousand students, in most instances), and that we were unconcerned with communicating with others outside the discipline. In response, public anthropology was conceived in the 1990s with the goal of addressing important social concerns and using anthropological praxis to engage the broader public.

For the past three years, I and one of my students and co-writer of this article, Andrea Zvikas, have undertaken a new project, which we've named "Causes: Valdosta State University's Mini-Film Festival." Causes invites people from all over our community—not just students—to write and produce 90-second films on issues they deem

important to the community. The goal is simple: to get all of us who live in Lowndes County, Georgia, to ponder some of our casual habits and to seek better ways of doing things here. The hope is that the collective wisdom and creativity of various community members can stoke our collective imagination—maybe even our “collective conscience”—and generate improvements in our way of life. Our somewhat quixotic reasoning is that change has to start somewhere, so why not initiate it right now, right here “in our own backyard”? The production guidelines for Causes are simple: (1) produce a 90-second film in either Windows Media or Real Player; (2) write a script about a local issue; (3) introduce the film with a five-second title page, such foreshadowing makes for more parsimonious and effective narrative; (4) make sure that the sound is fully audible; and (5) avoid using music or images that are protected by copyright; instead, take your own pictures or videos and use a Web site like freeplaymusic.com for authorized background music and sound effects.

Our reasoning for the first three guidelines is the following: First, we believe that 90 seconds is an optimal length in that it is long enough to allow a story to be told effectively, yet brief enough to hold viewers’ full attention. With respect to the second guideline, we discourage topics that lack a local focus because we believe that distant topics—genocide in Darfur, for example, or mountaintop removal in West Virginia—are just too easy to ignore, whereas local issues are harder to turn away from and can be addressed almost immediately. Finally, we suggest the five-second title page because we have found that such foreshadowing makes for more parsimonious and effective narrative.

The films can cover any topic, and over the past three years we’ve received many interesting ones on such topics as dangerous pedestrian walkways, community gardens, on-campus racism, and budget cuts to school arts programs. As social scientists, we take particular

pleasure in observing the collective impressions of our participating ad hoc sociologists who have shown Causes audiences many remarkable things in the three years that our film festival has run.

My students, Andrea, and I, somewhat facetiously, refer to these films as “mini-documentaries,” but in truth, the quality of the productions varies from very rough to very polished. Participants submit everything from PowerPoint presentations set to catchy pop tunes (see, in particular, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nD2P9qkHLDw>) to high definition, multi-camera, multi-setting productions with original musical scores (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RU1lfVLfJuw>). Each year we have endeavored to raise the quality of the films, and in 2009 we attracted two professionals, one from New York and the other from Maine. Both, of course, produced films about issues of concern in their locales. The strategy here was that by invoking what is known as “the demonstration effect”—that is, the effect on the behavior of individuals caused by observation of the actions of others—future contributors, both in the audience as well as those viewing our films online, will aim for high production values when they make their films. We hope to attract our first European entry next year (2011); and Africa, too, is in our sights, for although we continue to wish to emphasize local problems, the videos from elsewhere enable us to learn about the problems facing other people and, more importantly, to see how they are dealing with them. Even more exciting, however, has been the involvement of several local schools.

Since the project’s inception, my assistant/co-author and I have been hoping to get students of all ages involved in Causes. We visited many of the area’s elementary schools and made our pitch to the principals and other administrators, and we lobbied friends working in the two area high schools and a local agricultural college. Our message was that we believe that our project has the potential to work

on two very different levels. The first is straightforward and aims to take advantage of new computer technologies, namely, YouTube and Facebook, in order to disseminate a critique of a particular community social problem that is near and dear to the producers' hearts. In short, apply the critical thinking skills supposedly taught in school to identify and fix a local problem. By doing so, we aim to raise consciousness as a first step in the change process. In the making of the film *A Chorus of Fear*, I learned that a great deal of conflict occurs in society when a controversial event lacks a comprehensive and credible narrative. In the absence of such a narrative, misinformation rules, emotions run high, and tensions remain constant. I also learned that narration itself is a skill that many people don't do well; indeed, it is one that many people lack altogether. This shortcoming is particularly problematic in a town that is served by a decidedly conservative newspaper. *A Chorus of Fear* provided a credible narrative of a truly momentous local event, and people on both sides of the issue were able to understand the feelings of at least some of those on the opposing side. Through that experience, I learned that narrative succeeds because it engages the listener and causes him or her to suspend judgment, if only temporarily. That pause is precisely what is needed for any cognitive reframing to occur and, subsequently, for inter-subjectivity, which is essential to empathy, to become possible. Empathy promotes understanding and fosters respect. We believe that the Causes Mini-Film Festival can work in the same manner.

We know that Facebook has over 400 million worldwide users and that the average Facebook user has 130 friends, so that when someone reposts one of our videos—all of which are uploaded to YouTube—the message spreads rapidly throughout the community and beyond. In fact, our Facebook group has members from very diverse locales. One way or another, people hear about us. They repost our videos, and many write encouraging comments on our Facebook

and YouTube pages. Such is the power and magic of new media that we worry just a bit less about threats to Americans' first amendment rights to free speech caused by the high costs of advertising and the ever-increasing degree of media consolidation, the very reasons I first proposed this project idea. In fact, one of my class's early videos was in support of a US congressional candidate whose campaign funds were dwarfed by those of his incumbent rival.

Just as important as disseminating a clear political message, however, is the second level, in which we encourage children and teens to get involved and to participate as equals. To become our teachers. To give us their point of view. It is rare in our normally top-down education system for students to have a say in the curricular agenda in this way, so right away we see a benefit. We also believe that the concise form of narration demanded by the mini-film format embodies critical thinking skills, which we think are very useful to a child's education. We further believe that storytelling inculcates skills that a strictly "facts-based" pedagogy does not. And many of our teaching colleagues in our local schools agree. Our project has now become their project.

One can easily see the impact the project has on these children's perspectives. Filmmaking develops a wide variety of academic and social skills. It encourages kids to be concise and creative. The accuracy required by the imposition of the 90-second time constraint forces storytellers to thoroughly understand their topic and ensures that all of the producers do a bit of research in writing their scripts. Kids turn to library and Internet sources and maybe even conduct an interview. Since identifying a social problem and presenting it didactically already implies a solution, we believe that participation in Causes augments the skill of problem solving at a precocious stage of development among children in our public schools. Last, the project promotes teamwork. Many of the filmmakers work in teams. Some

of our videos have featured grim statistics on teen pregnancy, local school dropout rates, bullying, and incidences of domestic violence. Storytelling changes the educational dynamic in a most interesting way. When students get to tell the story, they become invested in telling it well. They really do their homework, and they pay attention to the finer details. They also retain information better. In the process, I would argue, they learn more about the topic and something about citizenship as well. All of these positive aspects of Causes were evident to the local donors who have funded the small Causes budget for the past two years.

Perhaps no video better illustrates all of the foregoing arguments than the one entitled *Dear Valdosta City Council*, which was made by a third grade class in 2009 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Mnz5teLOcA>).

So, each year in January, on the Saturday evening between Martin Luther King's Birthday and the Super Bowl, we gather the community and show our films, and we learn together. Interested readers may view the films at our Causes—Valdosta's Mini-Film Festival Facebook group page here: <http://www.facebook.com/?sk=messages#!/group.php?gid=5717816447&ref=ts>. The film festival lasts about two and a half hours, and the atmosphere in the auditorium has a decidedly boisterous feel to it. We encourage this by playing 1960s-era revolutionary pop songs beforehand as well as providing an intermission show featuring a campus improvisational comedy troupe that performs theme-appropriate skits. In short, for a small southern town in the middle of winter, the atmosphere is rarefied. Sometimes amusing, sometimes solemn, there is laughter and there are tears, sharing and empathy.

One other regular feature of our ritual is the distribution of reusable shopping bags to members of the audience, purchased with part of our grant money. My students and I joke that we're igniting

revolution right there in the auditorium. And, in fact, recycling and the use of plastic shopping bags and other environmental issues are popular issues at the film festival (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OA7d5-yaFos>). At the same time, however, some of our participants' perspectives are not always what one might call "liberal" or "progressive." We've had interesting takes on the death penalty and pro-life causes over the past few years. But that's okay, too, for there is no more suitable setting for the civil exchange of ideas than a college campus. Moreover, despite our disagreement with some of the issues, we would never wish to do anything to foster censorship. Perhaps due to this philosophy, Causes Film Festival is thriving. We have grown, both in the number of films we've received—from 40 to 65 to 80 over the past three years—as well as in the diversity of our participants. In addition to the participation of some of the local schools, last year's (2009) contributors included a church youth group and a group of breast cancer survivors from upstate New York. Our campus is also well represented, with films being made across the various colleges on campus. In fact, our most watched film so far (73,000 hits on YouTube) is by a physics major, promoting nano-solar technology as a solution to the world's energy problems (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCLwk7ObEr0>). Another of our films, produced by an artist and executed in a cartoon format, explores the interesting American contradiction between entitlement programs and the ideology of self-reliance. This was featured on the website of the PBS program *Now*. Yet another on blood donation made a stir with the local Red Cross. Do you have a cause? If so, please make your own 90-second mini-documentary and we'll see you in Valdosta the weekend between the Martin Luther King holiday and the Superbowl.

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