

East Austin Stories Exchange: Facilitating 'Empathy' for Differing Perspectives

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Abstract: The East Austin Stories Exchange is a web-based platform where junior high and high school students can share personal films about their community and empathize with the perspectives presented in other students' films. The goal of the project is to foster students' ability to incorporate perspectives different than one's own into a developing worldview. This poster presentation will present our needs assessment, design solutions, and demonstrate the *Exchange's* functionality.

Introduction

The *East Austin Stories Exchange* is a design experiment that aims to use a web-based community to facilitate the development of 'empathy' in junior high and high school students for perspectives and worldviews different than their own. The *Exchange* is an extension of *East Austin Stories*, a 3-year old project in the Radio, Television & Film Department at the University of Texas that enables students to learn about their community through the production of personal documentaries, specifically focusing on the stories of people and places in East Austin.

Needs Assessment

The purpose of the *East Austin Stories* project is to prompt students to explore their community by uncovering stories, cultural perspectives, and personal histories. While participating in the production of a film may lead to a deeper understanding of the film's subject matter, the project team's experience over the past three years indicates it is insufficient to help students gain empathy for perspectives presented in other students' work.

Empathy is the imaginative intellectual and emotional participation in another's experience. An individual must extend beyond their personal view, and be able to experience other perspectives as if it were his or her own (Bennett, 1998). The affective nature of film affords it the potential to invoke a sense of 'sympathy' in a viewing audience, by prompting them to imagine what it is like to be someone else. However, these emotions are frequently disconnected from cross-cultural contexts. East Austin is a diverse community of Latino, African American and immigrant families; while socio-economically diverse, the community consists of many middle to lower income households. Currently there is no mechanism in the East Austin Stories project to enable students to make the necessary connections between the films they produce and the diverse perspectives they represent. These connections are essential in order to foster a greater sense of empathy for the various perspectives presented.

There are several obstacles to experiencing empathy that we seek to address in this project. Students are often unaware of their own cultural bias or perspective and often make the mistake of believing that everyone shares a common perspective. Additionally, empathy is a complex phenomenon of intellectual and emotional awareness that often requires a certain quality of serendipity and randomness (Duane and Hill, 1996). The existing design of East Austin Stories currently lacks any consideration for these obstacles. In addition, the current design lacks a wider social context where those tacit assumptions can be discussed, challenged, and explicated (Wells, 2000).

Design Solution

The *East Austin Stories Exchange* extends the objective of the current project by providing a web-based platform where students can incorporate their work into the context of the multiple perspectives presented through the work of other students. Prior to exploring connections between student films, a teacher facilitates a discussion of the different perspectives presented in the documentaries in order to help students acknowledge that each film, including their own, presents a unique, independent, and subjective

worldview. Once the students are grounded in this concept, they can utilize the *Exchange* to explore the films of others.

Our design solution is to create a complimentary website to the existing course allowing students to index scenes within their films by theme and cross-reference them with other films that deal with similar topics. They are encouraged to explore the films serendipitously, using the hyperlinked tags to jump from scene to scene in different movies (which are related by their connected themes). The indexed buttons embedded in the videos allow students to view the videos out of chronological sequence, in a manner that allows their imaginations to wander freely through the content of the videos. It is hoped that this vicarious experience will lead students to extend their boundaries between themselves and the external world (Eisenberg and Strayer 1987), and students will experience the video segments as if they were an internal construct of their own minds (Bennett, 1998).

Through this method of exploration and discovery, students are able to uncover themes and connections among the movies that may not have been apparent otherwise. Students are encouraged to use their explorations to engage topics of interest, research them and submit these themes into the *Exchange* website for discussion. The resulting social interaction prompts students to acknowledge bits of information and viewpoints other than their own, and frequently leads to a cognitive conflict that triggers disequilibrium and drives intellectual development (von Glaserfeld, 1987).

Conclusion & Next Steps

Upon completing the production of the *Exchange*, we would like to expand the use of the project to teachers in other subject areas— particularly in Language Arts and Social Sciences. We will be conducting user-tests of *The East Austin Stories Exchange* to provide our overall design with formative feedback, as well as indications for future design work and research.

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