Reflecting on ARC-ista-hood, 2008
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Creative – Complicated – Connecting - Pro-active – Practical – Political: These were some of my first impressions when I first read about the Art of Regional Change’s pilot project: “Up from the Understory.” The idea of a community media project set within the context of academia appealed to me with its promise of both efficacy (with its relevance to the communities served by this project) and examination.

In both media and activist projects, what often gets lost is the “bigger-picture” perspective. As filmmakers and activists we move with great momentum towards our screening, protest, event, etc, and have little time during or after the process to reflect together on the process, our position as makers/ activists, and the outcome of our endeavors. But academics are experts at stepping back and examining critically even the things we cherish. The possibility of bringing this multi-layered production model into the classroom also appealed to me – and seemed to offer, in effect, a higher-stakes example of the model of filmmaking that I generally try to present to students. The ARC’s “Up from the Understory,” was conceived of as a community media project that includes a big picture perspective, from the framework of the ARC fellows to the various advisory committees from the participating communities. So I gladly took the opportunity to participate, and also to bring my graduate seminar into the project, with hopes that we could both do, study, and, teach, the process of an examined model of community media production.

In my graduate seminar, “Anthropology 210: Projects in Documentary and Ethnographic Film,” a small group of students from several fields (Anthropology, Textiles, Performance Studies, Art Studio, and Technocultural Studies), explored ethical issues of documentary filmmaking. We considered the filmmaker’s presence and its effect on the documented situation, as well as the investments of both documentarians and subjects in the act of representation.

Our invitation into “Up from the Understory,” was specifically an invitation to collaborate with the local community, rather than to simply observe and tell a story that seemed relevant to us. We were assigned to work with a small group of Blue Mountain community leaders to produce a short video that provided historical context to the revitalization video stories that the youth produced. The local committee provided us a script, and we revised and responded to it. The first draft that we received from the community read as a very detached, “voice of god” narrated story, locating the “Understory” somewhere up in the sky and working, we thought, against the goals of the project. My students and I communicated via email and skype with community members to brainstorm, developing ideas imagery and narratives that felt as personal and grounded in the local landscape and history as possible. We recruited community members to recount the stages of the area’s history of boom/ bust cycles and revitalization from their homes and other local spots, and we asked for photographs, graphics, and other imagery that would illustrate and enrich the history.
Our production consisted of a single long day; five students and I traveled out to Calaveras County and broke into two crews who covered a huge amount of filming in several different locations. Our resulting footage provided us with fodder for several weeks of work, editing and shaping the material into a short 7 minute video that accomplished the community’s goals while satisfying our aesthetic desires.

The editing process unfolded, as it often does, as a series of lessons about shooting, directing, collaborating, and storytelling. Working alongside the group of beginning student filmmakers, I saw that the stakes of classroom collaboration and community involvement made the problems of editing all the more urgent for the students to solve.

But the final stage of this spring’s “Understory” project – the meetings between the Calaveras community members, media-making youth, and the UCD faculty and graduate students, was undeniably the most meaningful for all groups. At the local presentation, youth spoke meaningfully to community leaders, describing the unique issues that they face as Calaveras County’s next generation. At UC Davis, a similarly poignant and fruitful conversation was started between UCD faculty, grads, and the Calaveras youth. It was at these moments, intended as celebration/completion of the project, that I felt that the current Understory had really begun to come Up.

My lessons in working on this project, and my suggestions for the continuation of ARC community projects, have to do, therefore, with value of communication and collaboration across generations and demographic categories. The bigger picture perspective, in other words, that ARC’s model offers is not merely a model of faculty examining and discussing the community media production. Rather, I would suggest and look forward to a timeline that allows for more materialization of the rich possibilities of rural youth collaborating with UCD students, of local community leaders collaborating with UCD faculty, and of discussions about the task of representation occurring among all four of these groups.