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ABSTRACT

An urban high school English/journalism class used the production of a community-focused newspaper as a strategy for the self-determination of young African Americans. The intervention emphasized social relations--focusing on specific verbal and social skills which young people can use in determining and reaching a variety of communication goals of their own choosing. Approximately half of the 60 students in 2 eleventh-grade English West Philadelphia urban high schools participated in the production of the newspaper "QWest." Students chose their own story topics, wrote in their own words, and made group decisions about the content of the publication. The class differed from a traditional journalism course in its consistent emphasis on group identity. Evidence of change in the students was gathered from daily ethnographic participant observation. During the often rocky dynamics of group decisionmaking, students sometimes argued bitterly with one another. Reflecting on the paper's reception in the community, many students felt they had succeeded in reframing others' views of them. Findings suggest that practices based Habermas' theories of communicative action contributed to the growth of self-determination among students in an urban journalism classroom. (Contains 40 references.) (RS)

# Buried treasure: The theory and practice of communicative action in an urban high school newspaper

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ABSTRACT

**Buried treasure:**
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**in an urban high school newspaper**

Many high school journalism programs train young people to enter commercial news enterprises, paying scant attention to the social relationships involved in the construction of news. Yet these relationships can be significant facilitators of empowerment for young people. Following Habermas' notion of "communicative action," newsmaking practices can promote group effort and enhance self-determination. This paper ethnographically describes the "communicative action" occuring in a high school journalism project which has published a community newspaper since January 1992.

## I. Introduction

Many high school journalism projects, courses, programs, etc. take for granted that the unproblematic goal of their efforts is to train young people to enter the field of professional journalism and get jobs as reporters, copy editors, and so in in the employ of commercial news enterprises. Along the way, educators emphasize industry standards of the news business, and young people are socialized accordingly, while the social relationships involved in the gathering, construction and presentation of news remain largely unexplored.

Yet these relationships can be significant facilitators of empowerment for young people, and represent the "buried treasure" of journalism education. The practices of newsmaking not only enhance speech and textual communication skills, but, through communicative action, can also enhance perceptions of self-efficacy, strengthen reference group bonds, promote the sharing of viewpoints and the reframing of negative self-images, teach the value of cooperative effort, and enable the crossing of social boundaries into worlds not previously travelled. As young people construct stories of the world around them, learning to recognize their own shared interests and common predicaments, they can empower themselves to take more active, positive roles in their lives, whether or not they enter the profession of journalism.

This paper describes social relations in an educational demonstration project, an urban high school English/journalism class which uses production of a community-focused newspaper as a strategy for the self-determination of young African Americans. The intervention emphasizes specific verbal and social skills which young people can use in determining and reaching a variety of communication goals of their own choosing.

Gathering and writing news stories for a community newspaper, young people learn to speak to multiple audiences: the people they interview; the family members, neighbors and strangers who read and respond to their work; the school teachers who grade it; the classmates who critique it; and others. During the publication process, students come together in collaborative reporting, editing, design, decision-making and distribution efforts, and experience some of the joys and tensions of working for a common goal.

Using the ethnographic method of participant observation and student writings as evidence, this paper argues that the "buried treasure" of journalism education is the opportunity it offers learners to experience the empowering dynamics of communicative action. The discussion of social relations in this analysis is limited to the classroom interactions observed by the researcher, who necessarily sees incompletely and cannot experience all of the lifeworlds of the participants. However, classroom observation can illuminate many of the relational sites which may be influenced by such an intervention, and suggests many other sites where its impact may be felt.

## II. The Intervention in Context

### A. The Theoretical

The work of Joan Tronto (1989) offers an epistemological preface to Jurgen Habermas' theory of communicative action. Tronto rejects models of modern social life based on materialistic terms of production and exchange, calling instead for the development of a care-based social epistemology. "Caring implies some kind of on-going responsibility and commitment... When a person or a group cares about something or someone, we presume that they are willing to work, to sacrifice, to spend money, to show emotional

concern, and to expend energy toward the object of care" (p. 173). Although some views interpret "care" to involve a cared-for entity and a caring entity, thus implying a context of unequal power and relationships of dependency, Tronto envisions a society of equals involved in relationships based on interdependency and shared attention to one another's needs.

Habermas' theory of communicative action (1984) emphasizes the importance of communication practices in constructing social relations, especially those involving collective action and interdependency. Through communication, Habermas argues, human beings are enabled to transcend individual concerns and act together for the common good. Participants in dialogue continually negotiate understandings, he asserts, constructing a social world where "every new utterance is a test: the definition of the situation implicitly proposed by the speaker is either confirmed, modified, partly suspended, or generally placed in question" (p. 167). When people arrive at common situation definitions and are able to coordinate their actions through these shared views, what Habermas terms "communicative action" can take place. In this environment, speakers form communities, strengthening the integration of their social groups. They are no longer "primarily oriented to their own individual successes (but)... pursue their individual goals under the condition that they can harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions" (p. 286).

The recognition of common goals leads to the formation of reference groups, which Peter Berger (1963) sees as collectivities whose joint values, convictions and courses of action influence their members' own. In childhood role-playing, Berger says, youngsters "try on" a variety of social roles to prepare for adulthood; in adulthood these roles and groupings continue to shape social relations. Not only does the reference group provide

"role models" to which we can continually compare ourselves, but it also occupies a particular "vantage point in the universe. Every role has a world view dangling from its end. In choosing specific people one chooses a specific world to live in" (p. 120).

In some cases, such as that described by Sherif and Sherif (1966), the reference group provides an individual with a profound source of affirmation. "To the extent that the individual derives a sense of belongingness and a sense of being somebody to be counted through his membership in the group, the group increasingly becomes the source of his personal security and the context for gauging his personal feelings of success and failure in relevant spheres of activity" (p. 103). On the other hand, Berger notes, a nearly opposite sort of gratification occurs when an individual experiences the mobility of separating from his or her present social reality and enjoying an alternate one, "when an individual is enabled to jump from world to world in his social existence" (p. 136).

People who have learned to play multiple social roles through negotiating understandings of commonality with different kinds of people may gain membership to many different reference groups. But we do not always choose our groups; sometimes we are assigned to them, with negative consequences. Social identity is not a given, Berger says, but "is bestowed in acts of social recognition. We become that as which we are addressed" (p. 99). According to Robert K. Merton (1962), people's situation definitions of themselves and others can form a body of assumptions and expectations which serve to "predict" or shape a reality which then "comes true." Whether such definitions are based on ethnicity, gender, nationality, income level, sexual preference, age, or a thousand other distinctions, the in-group ("we") identifies its members as similar and places those who are believed to differ

significantly in an out-group ("they"). Then the in-group engages in systematic devaluation of the out-group, even to the extent of defining the same attributes it admires in in-group members (e.g. thrift, group loyalty, assertiveness) as stereotypical markers of odious difference (e.g. stinginess, clannishness, pushiness) when observed in out-group members.

In the internalized version of this phenomenon described by Pierre Bourdieu (1977), individuals rely on a matrix of unconscious expectations when facing uncertain outcomes. He calls this phenomenon the *habitus*, "the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations" (p. 72), and ascribes its genesis to a person's early childhood experiences, with the influence of later school or workplace experiences appropriated in. Bourdieu sees the habitus constructing an unconscious "logic of practice," where positive experiences in a person's past (and those of his family members) create optimistic expectations for the future, and negative experiences translate into pessimistic expectations.

As related to the African American youth in this demonstration project (and other historically oppressed groups), both the social institutions of the school and the press can be oppressive in constructing a constraining social identity. Education research has linked the poor school performance of minority and working-class children to their expectations of constraint in the job market (John Ogbu's 1974 study of African American and Hispanic American children and Paul Willis' 1981 research on working-class white British boys) and to teacher expectations of poor performance as a function of class (Howard Becker's 1970 analysis of teacher/pupil relationships). In the field of communication, research has documented the habitual construction of demonizing out-group definitions in the mass media (Teun van Dijk's 1988 content analysis of descriptions of ethnic minorities in newspapers and

Kirk Johnson's 1991 study of images of African Americans on television, among others). Such predictive concepts and speech practices can have damaging "real-world" effects. In the halls of the high school where this research took place, the negative images of young black teenagers displayed by the mass media exert powerful influence, shaping the expectations of students and teachers alike.

Paradoxically, the school and the press can also assist individuals in their efforts toward self-determination. If social reality is variable and constructed, as Hugh Mehan and Houston Wood (1975) argue, each "version" of social reality is dependent on the reflexive use of a body of knowledge in interaction with others - in other words, dependent on communication. The same so-called "real-world" events are "seen differently under the auspices of different practical concerns, and/or in the light of different bodies of knowledge" (p. 81). Social roles and relationships are unstable; realities may be breached, and other realities entered. "The relations among the terms people use in everyday descriptions are decided each time the terms are used... the internal structure of categorization is renewed on each occasion of interaction" (p. 124). According to Klaus Krippendorff (1989), religions, scientific paradigms, and other interpretive schema of sociopolitical relations are "reality constructions invented, talked about, held on to and complied with by all those involved and on both sides of the inequality" (p. 186).

Krippendorff asserts that perceptions of social constraint, whether imposed from outside or internalized, are cognitive traps that can be escaped discursively. Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974) note that people make and maintain social meanings by habitually grouping objects, phenomena, and other people into collections of entities with specific characteristics in common. Since the classifications used to group and judge are cognitive

constructs, "the assignment of an object to a given class is learned or is the outcome of choice, and is by no means an ultimate, immutable truth" ( p. 97). Through the "gentle art of reframing," the conceptual and/or emotional frame or viewpoint in which a situation is experienced is replaced by another perception which fits the empirical conditions of a situation equally well. "What turns out to be changed as a result of reframing is the meaning attributed to the situation, and therefore its consequences, but not its concrete facts (p. 95)." Groups as well as individuals can reframe their identities in the eyes of their beholders, Erving Goffman (1959) argues. "Instead of allowing an impression of their activity to arise as an incidental by-product of their activity, (groups) can re-orient their frame of reference and devote their efforts to the creation of desired impressions. Instead of attempting to achieve certain ends by acceptable means, they can attempt to achieve the impression that they are achieving certain ends by acceptable means" (p. 250).

Through the reframing of communication practices and the enablement of reference groups, the school and the press can encourage positive expectations as well as negative ones, and can facilitate cooperation and mobility between social groups through communicative action. Although either institution could be instrumental in this process, the journalism education project described here involves the workings of both.

B. The Practical

Research on group process and empowerment tells us that the success of a communication-based intervention depends on the relationships it contains or engenders. This intervention is influenced by other studies which also emphasize nurturing interpersonal relationships; the growth of perceptions of self-efficacy; and skills which members can use to assert

influence in their environments.

Some of the classroom activities described here were intended to provide experiences of success, important in the strengthening of individual and group perceptions of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, Albert Bandura (1986) notes, "is concerned not with the skills one has but with the judgments of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses" (p. 391). With E. Ozer, he argues (1990) that the most effective vehicle for developing the sense of efficacy is "mastery experiences. Performance successes build a sense of personal efficacy; failures undermine it" (p. 473). When groups of people develop this sense of efficacy collectively, they begin to overcome passivity or fatalism in favor of the belief that togther they can solve their problems through concerted effort and improve their lives.

Some activities were meant to foster group cohesiveness. When Sandra Harper (1991) observed a group of adults working as a team, she noted that members experience "increased task satisfaction, increased task performance, greater cooperation among group members, the personal growth and learning of the group members, and ultimately, the survival of the group" (p. 6 ). Sherif & Sherif (1974) assert that the peer group is the adolescent's most profound source of identity and reinforcement. In his work with African American youth gangs, J. Fox (1985) sees the group supporting members' desire for adult status in an otherwise hostile environment: "the gang functions to meet needs not fulfilled by the family, school, religious organizations, police and other institutions" (p. 26).

Together, the growth of perceptions of self-efficacy and group cohesiveness offered support for an equally important third emphasis, the reframing of self-images and the crossing of social boundaries. In a discussion of a youth-run newspaper he organized in New York City in 1980, Keith

Hefner (1988) says that the experience of group decision-making enabled the young editors of that paper to broaden their social worlds: "They learned the nuts and bolts of how to create an organization. They learned how to argue their point of view, listen to another point of view, test their perceptions against reality, evaluate problems and implement remedies, unite an extremely diverse group of people in a common purpose - make things work" (p. 22). In her study of a group of north Philadelphia working-class women, Wendy Luttrell (1988) observed that collective action expanded the social boundaries of group members: "When women have organized for their 'rights,' they have broadened the concept of 'rights' that secure additional resources to encompass 'rights' that also include new personal choices and options" (p. 153). Following these exemplars, some of the activities of the community journalism project described here were intended to encourage the young participants to construct more positive images of themselves and then use these images to try out new social roles.

## III. Methodology: The Constitution of Evidence

This intervention used journalism education to empower young people toward more active roles in their social worlds by promoting reference group identification, shared viewpoints, cooperative effort, perceptions of self-efficacy, the reframing of self-images, and the crossing of social boundaries into worlds not previously travelled. At an urban high school in West Philadelphia, two classes (approximately 60 adolescents) of 11th grade English students were invited to participate in the production of QWest, a community newspaper focusing on their neighborhoods. (The prototype edition of QWest had been published in the spring of the previous school year, as the pilot study for this research.)

Participation essentially stayed constant at about 30 students over the course of the 1992-1993 school year, with some previous non-participants joining the active group and others opting for the inactive group. Once a student had elected to join the QWest group, however, production of the newspaper was an integral part of the daily English period, and participation was mandatory. During each of four school terms, the reporting and writing of news stories was part of the regular assigned classwork. Then, depending on their own interests, QWest participants could also choose to edit the work of other students, shoot photographs, decide which stories would be published in the newspaper, contribute artwork and poetry, lay out pages on the computer, and distribute the finished copies.

The class was team-taught by Carol Merrill, a high school language arts teacher and writing specialist, and by the author of this paper, a former professional journalist/editor, now a communication scholar. The women supervised and directed the students' daily classroom efforts, taught basic computer skills, offered suggestions of sources and contacts, and provided transportation to interviews, but encouraged the young people to choose their own story topics, write in their own words, and make group decisions about the content of their publication. Two textbooks were used: Scholastic Journalism, Eighth Edition, eds. English, Hach and Rolnicki, 1990, and Holt Rinehart Winston's African American Literature, 1992, along with numerous articles from mainstream newspapers and the community press.

The class differed from a traditional journalism course in its consistent emphasis on group identity. Students were encouraged to explore the multiple meanings of the term *community* , to see themselves as a community of writers and as responsible members of the African American community in West Philadelphia. They were consistently urged to use the

communities in which they claimed membership as frames of reference for their stories. Thus, some of their work referred to the neighborhoods in which the young people lived ("the community of West Philadelphia"), some focused on African American social life ("the black community"); some emphasized age cohort ("the teen perspective"); some highlighted their own group identity ("the intelligent young QWest staff"); etc.

The evidence of change presented here was gathered over the course of the 1992-1993 school year from the students' expressions (from homework assignments, news stories, journals, essays, and interviews) and from daily ethnographic participant observation. It constitutes a sampling of many potential sites of growth and development, rather than an exhaustive cataloguing of individual and interpersonal experiences.

Participants were considered to be practicing self-determination when they asserted influence in their social systems on behalf of their own interests, developing communication skills and using them to enhance self-efficacy, take collective action, construct individual and group images, and cross social boundaries. While this covers a wide range of possible outcomes, the evidence presented here is strictly limited to those which could be observed during school-related interactions or those which the students shared with us. Observed areas of change included, but were not limited to, the scholastic (as in the improvement of descriptive writing, grammar and spelling, or learning how to edit another person's work); behavioral (as in collaborative reporting and decision-making with fellow students, or applying for a summer internship); and attitudinal (as in a sense of responsibility to take part in community problem-solving, or when a student began to consider himself an accomplished interviewer ).

## IV. The Intervention in Practice

### A. School, and then the rest of the world

The intervention is situated in an inner-city public high school, only one of the social worlds occupied by the participants. The 60 young African American potential participants in the project during the 1992-1993 school year were female and male residents of the inner city neighborhoods just west of downtown Philadelphia, between the ages of 16 and 19. All were 11th grade students attending West Philadelphia High School, a predominantly black public high school. These students and their peers pass through dozens of different physical and social environments in the course of the school day. In classrooms orderly or chaotic, some young people study the day's lesson while others paint their fingernails, munch potato chips, watch music videos, or sleep, heads down on the desks. In the mornings, young women in metallic jackets and huge hoop earrings carry their infants to the daycare center in the basement. At noon, young men with jeans pulled down around their narrow hips eat pulpy pizza in the crowded lunchroom where fights are frequent.

Metal detectors and identity cards are intended to keep trespassers, guns and knives out of the school. But these are often unsuccessful, and the hallways are charged with the threat of violence, verbal and physical. Intense interactions, surges of wounded pride and triumphant one-upmanship, cause threats, fights, tears, screams of rage and laughter, and a nonstop fog of expletives from both male and female students. Guns are found in lockers, scissors and icepicks in this year's black leather backpacks. A squad of security guards routinely searches and detains students. Some students seek shelter from the turbulent halls in the silent, nearly-empty library, the bright, airy computer lab, or the echoing gym. During the frequent "hall sweeps," others

dash down stairwells reeking of urine and hide in vacant classrooms. When apprehended, they line up under the fluorescent lights of the cramped discipline office for lectures, threats, and suspension from school.

During a single day at the high school, a student may interact with teachers, peers, offspring, love interests, rivals, administrators, counselors, teammates and security guards, communicating with dozens of different people in different social roles. Each interaction calls for a different role, a different choice on the part of the young actor. Even just one type of interaction - that between teacher and student - results in a wide variety of roles, as some teachers are deeply committed to their pupils, some allow them to sleep or watch television during class, and some even furtively engage in side jobs on school time. Over and over again, the school day demands that adolescents reconstruct the selves they present to others.

As an observational site for the researcher, the school is an accessible and rich link in a complex chain of human relations, yet it should not be privileged as the most important link. The adolescents also move in other "lifeworlds," described by Habermas as "a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns" which people apply to their experiences in an effort to create a shared sense of reality. In their various lifeworlds, high school students hold different bodies of knowledge, play different roles, and experience different motivations, which the public school curriculum too often often ignores. The students' experience of more salient physical and social realities on the street competes with the world of school for their attention, and wins. To its own detriment, the world of school generally ignores the other, more vivid, worlds of family, peer groups, neighborhoods, sexuality, work, ethnic, gender and religious identities, and the powerful influence of mass culture. Adolescents often see themselves as

agents of status and power on the neighborhood streets, while the school - which cannot even guarantee their physical safety, much less an education - seems bent on reducing them to the level of child, clown or criminal. As one young man with poor grades and even poorer attendance remarked, "I have so much going on in my life right now that I don't have *time* for school."

B. Hanging in the doorway

Recognizing that the school often loses its battle for young people's attention, the QWest newspaper project asked students to use their daily lives as foundation material for learning, challenging them to use the familiar as a jumping-off point into the unknown. The young people had relative freedom in choosing story topics that they were interested in, and in roaming far and wide for sources who might be able to answer their questions. Of course, as soon as a story carried a student outside the classroom and into the community, social boundaries would be crossed, and this was one of the objectives of the project. Participants were strongly urged to contact and interview people in their own locality, to get glimpses of various workplaces, lifestyles, and attitudes. In preparation, the class spent time practicing interview techniques and role-playing. Also, recognizing the insecurity some adolescents might feel in approaching complete strangers, the teacher and researcher maintained an extensive bank of contacts accessible to teens, and made themselves available as chauffeurs and chaperones on request. Still, for the first issue of the paper, some students handed in book reviews or editorials involving no interpersonal contact at all. Others interviewed only their friends or relatives. A brave few ventured out into their own community to interview adults, business people or professionals - many over the telephone.

But with each successive issue, more participants moved from "safe" to more socially "risky" choices. A shy young woman who never spoke up in class not only obtained an interview with Ramona Africa, the lone survivor of the world-infamous MOVE bombing in May 1985, but also brought her to the school to address the whole class. A taciturn young man interested in rap music visited one of the largest African American radio stations in the city and interviewed a popular disc jockey on the air. Another student took it upon himself to develop and distribute an attitude survey about the QWest project to class members. Two students applied for and won admission to a minority workshop for high school journalists - the first time any students from their school had participated. Another began freelancing sports reports for a community newspaper. Such acts of initiative involving the crossing of social boundaries are examples of change toward self-determination taking place at the individual level.

C. Building a community

Communication allows human beings to transcend individual concerns and act together for the common good, Habermas says. By engaging in dialogue together, they negotiate shared understandings of the social worlds they inhabit Building on these understandings, people can form "communities of interest," acting together for their mutual benefit. The stories published in the QWest community newspaper show evidence of the young people's shared view of the community and worlds they live in. Predominant topics which the students wanted to emphasize were racism, teen pregnancy, violence, drug abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and suicide, along with the need for positive role models, an Afrocentric emphasis in education and the appreciation of black culture. Interest in these

topics was recurrent, and multiple stories were filed about each. Although students had no *formal* sense of themselves as a community of young people with shared values, their expressions of interest over the year suggested an implicit understanding of the concept.

The growth of a community of interest was also observed in the functioning of QWest's "editorial board." Once the stories for each issue were written, a group of from 14-20 students was self-selected from among the writers. Participants read the rough drafts of all stories submitted to the paper, critiqued and edited them, and decided together which should be prominently displayed and which should be excluded if space was tight. These meetings offered a setting for the development and testing of collective values and common situation definitions - the raw materials of a communication community. Students were encouraged to use these discussions as a laboratory for the growth of group identity and cohesiveness. Members of different cliques - poets and athletes, star students and remedial readers alike - came together to take action in producing the newspaper. Through dialogue about their own classroom community, they were now sharing situation definitions and acting together to shape a collective voice.

Despite the harmonious sound of the theory, in practice the process was neither easy nor pleasant. During the often-rocky dynamics of group decision-making, students sometimes argued bitterly with one another, shouting each other down, swapping insults about each other's writing ability or personalities while the rest sat back in their chairs, arms folded across their chests, disgusted. "I don't like it when everyone agrees on something and it's one person who tries to make things difficult," a young woman said. At other times, quiet students were intimidated by louder ones, quickly abandoning their opinions in the interest of peace when it became obvious that others

disagreed. "I like teamwork. Sometimes we have it and sometimes we don't," a student wrote. One young woman said she liked the volatile meetings because, "I like getting my point across to people and explaining myself." But another student bitterly complained that her fellow students were "not fair to other people when they are speaking. Also the other students do not respect other people and their views."

However, in the process of making joint decisions about the newspaper, a reflection of their collective voice, these students came to see themselves and their fellow students as competent, cooperative actors. "Most of my peers are very articulate writers," a young man said. They all enjoyed the decision-making exercises involving layout, news judgment, and evaluation of others' writing, and expressed a palpable sense of ownership when the fresh copies of the paper returned from the printer. "I like the editorial board because I get to see the work when it's okay, and after my input and the help of my classmates, I get to see the finished product, which will be good," a student wrote. When these students took class trips or took part in the distribution team later, it was common for them to introduce themselves to adults in the community this way: "I'm a member of the QWest editorial board."

Although it was also the project's goal to create an affirming sense of community throughout the double class of 60 students, the dynamics involved in dealing with so many young people - the passivity of some students, the competitiveness of others, and the disruptive energies of a fierce and persistent few - made any kind of group identity at this level evasive. Although any student was free to participate in the news enterprise at any time, a sense of cohesion tended to exist only among those who worked closely together on the paper.

D. Back up! (Reframing)

The mass media takes its toll on young people's self-perception. Countless news reports on teen violence alarm not only adults, but the teens themselves, who feel themselves at risk and at the same time resent that they are perceived as a threat by others. The QWest students felt that producing the community newspaper gave them a chance to reframe this public view of themselves. Many of their news stories were based on young people's involvement in the community and teen aspirations for the future. On the front page of the last issue for the year, one young woman even admonished adults, "We need the older generation to think positively about us. Don't turn your backs on us, because we need you."

Reflecting on the paper's reception in the community, many students felt they had succeeded in reframing others' views of them. "When people read QWest they are very surprised," a female student wrote. "Surprised because when people think of West Philadelphia High School they think of violence and corruption. But QWest shines a light over our school." A young man agreed. "There are so many negative things said about West Philadelphia students that (people) are shocked to see us come together and do something positive. They realize we care about our community." Another said, "(The paper) leaves the impression that young people do have minds instead of using it to try and kill somebody." "The paper shows that not all teenagers are bad," a young man wrote. "There are some who wants to really better the community." A young woman who was very active in the paper's production said, "Some people applaud the story writers for helping the community and having solutions to some of these problems. They also see that the young generation isn't falling apart everywhere so they don't give up

hope."

Because some of the young people who were especially active in the paper's production felt that their efforts had been a service to the community, participation in QWest also allowed them to reframe their own ideas of themselves. "We have did our job as a newspaper. We have informed," an active student wrote. Another said, "Issues and problems in the community have been discussed in these articles. From these articles, changes can start to be made. Also, by us as youth addressing and recognizing the problems, adults can see that we want a change for the better and that we are willing to work at it." One young woman wrote, "I think that using the newspaper to get out in the community was our way of helping. Through the newspaper we have touched on a lot of tough subjects." "Solving problems within our community is going to be long and hard but I really think that we are approaching it the right way," another said.

Some students, however, who had not participated directly in the paper, had little faith in the medium as a way of promoting the kind of dialogue that would help their community. "You was covering important issues but it didn't help the problems within this community, because they is still racisms, violence, suicide, homicide, etc.," a student from Trinidad wrote. Another remarked, "The problems don't stop just by writing it down on paper. We have to take action. I do not think that writing it down in the newspaper is gonna solve anything."

## V. Conclusions

Practices based on theories of communicative action have been shown to be a factor in the self-determination of individuals and groups in many settings. The evidence presented here suggests that these practices may also

contribute to the growth of self-determination among students in an urban journalism classroom The forum of a newspaper allowed for the regular examination of issues important to the group. Through dialogue with each other, participants agreed upon common predicaments faced by themselves and their communities. Some experienced a sense of mastery, and pride in their fellow reporters and editors. Some began to feel competent using communication to move from one social group to another. Many felt that the paper reframed the negative popular image of young African Americans and represented them in a positive light to audiences known and unknown.

If, as Berger says, the joint convictions and courses of action taken by a group influence those of its members, then journalism education which emphasizes group relationships can offer an influential environment for personal growth. It can teach useful strategies for battling stereotypes and creating desired impressions, and it can facilitate cooperation and mobility between social groups. Through communicative action, newsmaking can allow young people to recognize shared interests and common predicaments, and to work toward common goals. Gathering and writing news stories, young people can learn to speak to and present themselves to multiple audiences. Working together on collaborative editing, design, decision-making and distribution, they can experience in microcosm some of the joys and struggles of a community. *Whether they choose to enter the journalism profession or not*, students can use these experiences to empower themselves to take more active, positive roles in their lives.

When we attempt to involve ourselves in the lives of young people through a scholastic intervention, we must not lose sight of the fact that school is only one of many sites of social interaction in their lives, and possible viewed as the least important. An intervention's anticipated affects

cannot be isolated from other influences and experiences in the young peoples' lives which we cannot know, account for, or control. As the young people mature, it is possible that other experiences not related to newsmaking are also raising their comfort levels in social interaction, providing experiences of mastery, strengthening group bonds and increasing their influence in social systems. Thus, we do not draw direct causal inference of empowerment from the evidence presented in this research.

However, many of the experiences urban adolescents have are detrimental to their social growth, and do *not* contribute to their self-determination. The popular press bulges with stories of this "generation at risk." Current studies by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (1993) and the National Center for Health Statistics (1993) point to dramatic nationwide increases in the rates of violent death, criminal arrest and pregnancy for teenagers. These statistics were given faces at West Philadelphia High School. Among the QWest participants, one student's 15-year-old cousin was murdered in a drive-by shooting, the boyfriend of another student was killed, a classmate was arrested for carjacking and first-degree murder. (In conversation, several of the students revealed that they had seen family members die as a result of their involvement with drugs, and one wrote a news story about it.) The class had six teen mothers, some with more than one child. We learned of at least three abortions, and heard two suicide threats. In an environment so threatening, an educational strategy which acknowledges young peoples' life experiences and holds their attention long enough to strengthen their communication skills may not only contribute to their self-determination, but their survival.

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