

By Michelle Mann

# Helping Students Express

Just a couple of years ago, Sam Kitondo was struggling to succeed at his London, England, high school. He was a spirited and outspoken teenager but had earned a reputation as a troublemaker and was struggling to buck the gang stereotypes that plagued his community.

Then he got involved with Adobe Youth Voices (AYV), a global educational program sponsored by the Adobe Foundation, the philanthropic arm of software maker Adobe. The education-based initiative teaches underserved kids aged 13–18 how to use digital media to comment on their world, share ideas, and take action on the social issues that are important to them. The AYV mission is to help students “create with purpose” and spark a dialogue for change around the world by harnessing the energy and insight of young people.

Sam took this mission to heart. Under the guidance of his AYV-trained instructors, he produced a striking film called “What about the Families?” a psychological inquiry into the effects of prison life on the offenders’ families.

Today, Sam’s own life is headed in a completely new and exciting direction. As a direct result of the inspiration he found while working with AYV, he is now in his first year of a media and cultural studies degree at the University of East London. Through the program, he also became a protégé of

British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) award-winning director Noel Clarke and hopes to have a cameo role in Clarke’s next feature film.

Sam wants to give back some of what he has gained as well. He develops and oversees media projects for hundreds of local kids as chairman of the Brixton Road Youth Centre, an

organization managed by young adults, and he leads a workshop on producing short films that tackle social issues. The students also may get the chance to screen their films on television. Sam’s passion for inspiring young people moved him to appeal to the mayor of London for more funding to help expand the youth center’s activities. He has expressed an interest in becoming an AYV educator and is putting a proposal together to implement the program at Brixton Road.



# Their Passion

Adobe's global philanthropic program, Adobe Youth Voices, gets to the root of the achievement gap by inspiring kids to actively engage in their own education with digital media technologies.

## Re-engaging Youth

Educators and policymakers worldwide are facing the same problem: figuring out how to improve the quality and impact of secondary education. So far, much of the public discussion has focused on measuring student achievement and teacher performance. But, at a time when so many students are struggling just to stay in school, the Adobe Foundation saw that the issue was even more fundamental than raising test scores. It has to do with student engagement. And one way to get kids interested in

education is to use something that already interests them—technology.

For years, Adobe has worked closely with educators and community organizations around the world to find out how technology can motivate and empower students to participate more actively in their own education. AYV and its partners are trying to achieve just that by helping educators use digital media to breathe new life into lessons about communication, team collaboration, narrative, analysis, and writing.

Of course, implementing a technology-based curriculum is only the starting

point. The program has also worked to help educators understand how to make what kids learn, and the way they learn it, more meaningful and useful. So far, AYV and its education partners are demonstrating that the right applications of technology can inspire students to develop new communication skills and actively engage at school and in their communities. And they are discovering that many students, like Sam, are not only changing the course of their lives, but also changing the world as a result. (See “Changing Lives around the World on pages 12–13.)

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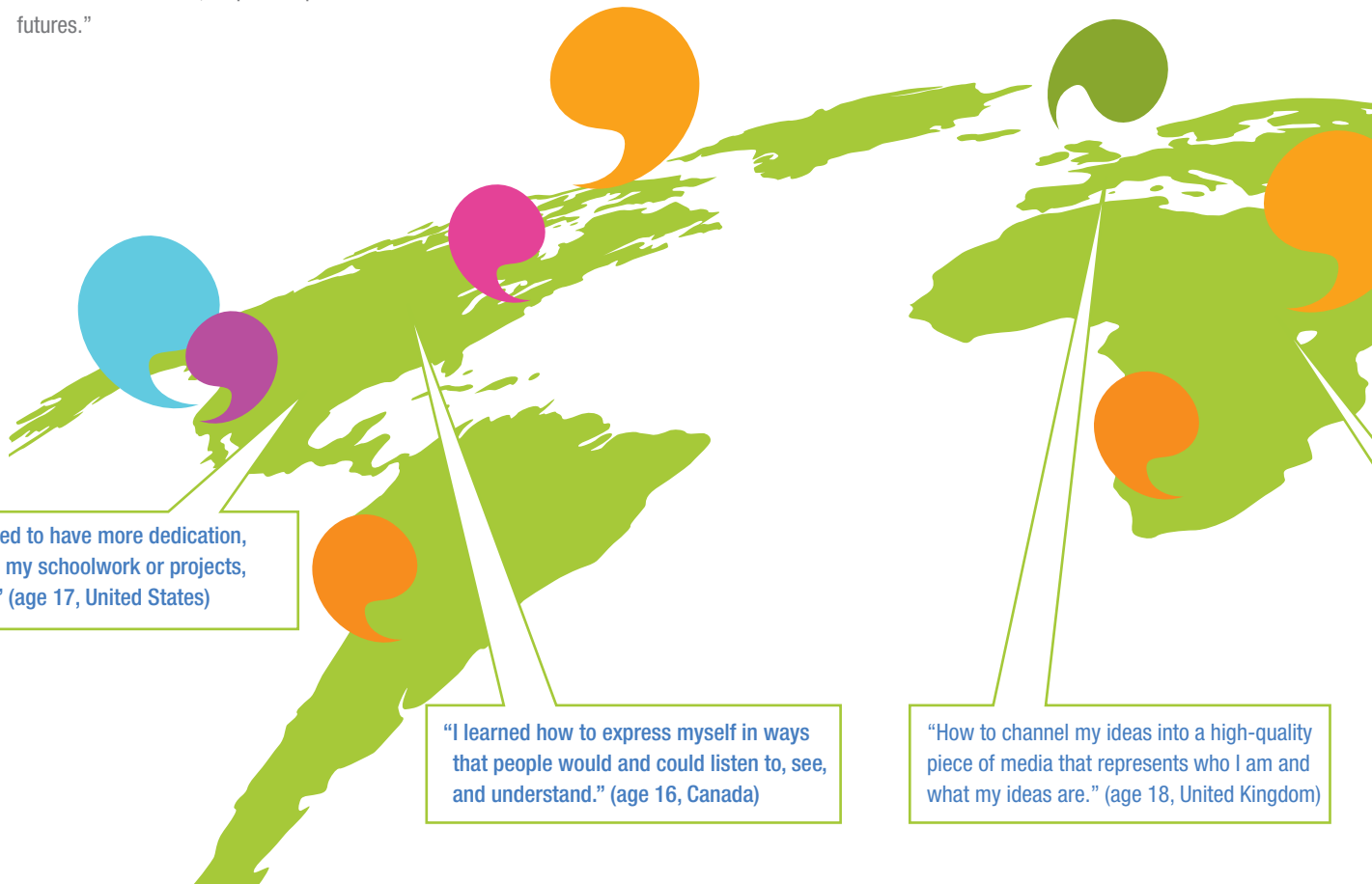
## Changing Lives around the World

Adobe Youth Voices has had a profound impact on the lives of students and educators around the world. Beyond digital literacy, the program is making a real difference by unlocking those exciting “ah-ha” moments when students discover their own voices and start to realize their own potential. Here are just a few examples of inspiring projects that participants have completed.

High school students in Redwood City, California, created “Make it Right,” a music video that addresses problems they experience daily in their community. “We came up with the song because we were at the stage in our lives where we wanted our voices to be heard,” explains Victor Rosas, one of the video’s creators. “Once it was out there, it opened up our futures.”

Kyle Ames, a 17-year-old from San Jose, California, created a public service animation titled “Don’t Spread the Hate,” which conveys the sadness and futility of discrimination. AYV gave Ames and other youth a forum where they could discuss important topics and openly share their views, which fostered an environment that promoted learning and increased understanding.

Students at Newcomers High School, a school for recent immigrants in New York, created “No More Silence,” a video about the domestic abuse of undocumented immigrants. As part of the school’s integrated approach, the video’s creators were invited into other classes to lead discussions, furthering the reach of the lessons learned when they created the video.



“I’ve learned to have more dedication, not only in my schoolwork or projects, but in life.” (age 17, United States)

“I learned how to express myself in ways that people would and could listen to, see, and understand.” (age 16, Canada)

“How to channel my ideas into a high-quality piece of media that represents who I am and what my ideas are.” (age 18, United Kingdom)

### By the Numbers

An independent team of professional researchers from the Education Development Center annually evaluates the Adobe Youth Voices program’s worldwide impact from the perspective of both educators and youth participants. The evaluation focuses on student engagement and development of digital age skills. The results contribute to the ongoing development and growth of AYV and help the program reach and positively affect more young people each year. Results from the 2009–10 program year indicate:

97% reported they were encouraged to be creative.

93% of participants report that they are interested in continuing their education after high school.

90% of youth reported that they tried their best on their AYV projects.

**Kayf Abdulqadir, an 18-year-old from Canada,** says that AYV has helped her speak up about how the hijab, the head covering traditionally worn by Muslim women, is portrayed in the media. Through her team's video, "Fabric: The Unveiled Truth," she gained the confidence to share her perspective on a sensitive issue and learned the value of teamwork, all while building invaluable technical skills.

**A team of young AYV filmmakers in South Africa** captured the hardships that mothers face raising children alone in the township where they live. While highlighting the families, the filmmakers also celebrated each mother's resilience in overcoming the struggles of daily life. Throughout the process, the students used their newly developed storytelling and technology skills to weave together a compelling piece that called for action in their communities. This short film was selected as part of Youth Producing Change, the first exclusively student-produced program of short films at the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival.

**Ruh al-'Alam, an AYV educator from London, England,** teaches a group of deaf students who are creating a series of new media artwork that will challenge preconceptions of deafness and reach a global audience. What is truly amazing about the project is that it enables others to "hear" deaf people through the visuals they produce. Introducing these students to new creative technologies and processes opens up a world of potential. Working on their own and in teams with teachers and mentors, the students engage in interactive discussions and storyboarding, then use imaging, video, and audio technologies to capture and communicate their work. Whenever possible, they go out into their communities, interview peers and community experts, and, along the way, capture real-world footage and images that they can work into the final project. "What matters is what and how they express themselves," says al-'Alam. "It's the beauty of hearing their voices and stories as well as helping bring them to life."



"I learned how to make videos and gain much more confidence in interacting with other people." (age 13, Uganda)

"I have learned how to take initiative on issues that affect us." (age 17, India)

"I learned a lot of things—that I have the right to be heard. Using media is another form to get my voice out there." (age 16, New Zealand)

**89%** of educators reported that their students expressed interest and enthusiasm about the topics of their media projects.

**87%** believe that, as a result of AYV, their opinions on issues they care about matter.

**87%** report that they were expected to make high-quality media.

**86%** report that they can influence others with their ideas.

**80%** reported that the things they are learning through AYV are important to their lives.

**79%** of youth improved their abilities to work in a group setting to solve problems.

## Working Together

AYV teaches young people how to work with both teachers and fellow students to create videos, animations, photo essays, presentations, music, and other media projects on the topics they are interested in. By fostering this type of collaborative learning environment and creative expression, AYV is helping educators develop forward-thinking lesson plans that get students excited and involved while teaching creative media technologies that promote digital literacy.

Some might question whether making videos or other digital media projects can really make a difference in young people's education and development. But research has shown that 93% of AYV kids planned to continue their education after high school. Although this can't be attributed solely to the program, the statistic is telling, as the schools and communities that qualify for the program traditionally have few resources.

The program provides software, teacher training, mentoring, online collaboration tools, education materials, and curricula. It also produces or supports exhibitions that give students a public forum to share their perspectives with a broader audience. The students who participate in these public screening events reach a level of personal achievement and fulfillment that they rarely experience in the classroom. By sharing their perspectives through creative projects of their own making, students are able to find their own voices and apply their newfound confidence to other academic and life challenges.

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In the AYV model, all students are encouraged to participate, and the teacher's role evolves from an information presenter to a facilitator of student-generated knowledge. Educators participating in AYV say they are now more aware of what young people value and care about, and they have begun basing more assignments on topics that really resonate with them. This shift is essential in helping students connect the skills they learn in school with their own life experiences. It also broadens student awareness of topical issues as they discuss and view the work their peers create.

While the students work on projects to share with local and global audiences, they also build valuable skills that can open doors to future success. The results are frequently transformative, as they develop creativity, communication, and collaboration skills that are essential for success in today's global workforce.

## Getting Involved

The Adobe Foundation issues AYV grants through a request-for-proposals process to both governmental and non-governmental education organizations. These organizations are best informed and situated to select the local schools and programs that would most benefit from being part of AYV. Adobe then donates to the selected schools software, grants for production equipment,

teacher training, and ongoing support. It also offers them the opportunity to submit student work to festivals and events.

The rich teacher training component of the program gives educators a theory and approach to youth media, an introduction to Adobe tools, and hands-on experience making media in the form of either a video or graphic design project. The mentors responsible for training the teachers are experienced media artists who provide ongoing coaching. And as the teachers advance their skills over time through their work with AYV, they also learn how to teach courses on technology-based subjects such as animation, graphic design, and motion graphics.

For schools not in the AYV network, the Adobe Foundation has also launched Adobe Youth Voices Essentials (<http://essentials.youthvoices.adobe.com>), a set of curricula and resources that are free for download to help busy teachers create engaging new learning experiences for students. Crafted by digital media experts and trainers, Essentials includes step-by-step lesson plans and activities for print, video, photography, and animation to help educators launch, guide, and sustain effective youth media programs. Each curriculum provides valuable lessons that not only strengthen media-making skills, but also encourage critical thinking. Students are asked to consider the world around them and how they would create change through their own writing, collaborating, and critiquing. The lesson plans focus on youth-centered instruction, media production, and strategies for exhibition and distribution. Essentials also provides real-world examples of the media projects the young people

To learn more about the program and see the work Adobe Youth Voices students are producing, check out these sites:

Website: <http://youthvoices.adobe.com>

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/#!/adobeyouthvoices](http://www.facebook.com/#!/adobeyouthvoices)

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/adobeyv>

YouTube: [www.youtube.com/user/adobeyouthvoices](http://www.youtube.com/user/adobeyouthvoices)



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in the program have created to serve as inspiration for other students.

### Extending the Program's Reach

Since its inception in 2006, AYV has engaged more than 64,000 youth and 3,000 educators from 45 countries in its programs to develop original, thought-provoking content on a wide range of issues, including bullying, domestic violence, climate change, poverty, eating disorders, and the impacts of war. The program aims to reach more than 7,000 educators and 150,000 youth by the end of this year.

One way it strives to do that is through partnerships. AYV has joined forces with, and offered grants to, companies and organizations that have aligned philanthropic goals,

a focus on visual and multimedia art, and/or a mission to use or teach design as a tool to address social issues. Recent partners include the Black Eyed Peas Peapod Foundation, the PBS Foundation, and the Intel Computer Clubhouse Network. These partnerships are an effective method of extending the program's network, which allows it to reach more people in more areas.

Student media projects from AYV have also been showcased at such prestigious venues as the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, the Sundance Film Festival, and dozens of community events across the world. The exposure the projects receive allows the students to see the real-world effects their work can have

on others, and it creates a snowball effect as the program gains momentum and more people become aware of it.

Today, education is as important as ever in contributing to individual and global well-being. A focus on giving students more opportunities to learn and expand their skills is essential for success in today's global markets. There is ample reason to be optimistic. Many positive, technology-based initiatives, such as AYV, are showing how education can evolve to reach more young people like Sam Kitondo, engage them, and send them on their way to more successful, fulfilling lives.



*Michelle Mann has been the executive director of the Adobe Foundation for nearly seven years.*

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