

Community Connections

Local Ties

Five Tips for Making Great Student-Produced Community TV

BY JEFF CARTER

ADVOCATES FOR EDUCATIONAL technology often point to the power of technologies such as the Internet to extend learning beyond the classroom walls to the far corners of the world. But technology can also help students make deeper connections to the world right outside the school door—their own local communities.

One of the most common and effective ways to link schools with their surrounding communities is student television production. Video production with a community focus teaches kids a wide range of skills needed for academic success, such as writing, editing, critical thinking, technology, and teamwork. It also has other underlying benefits for students, parents, schools, and the community.

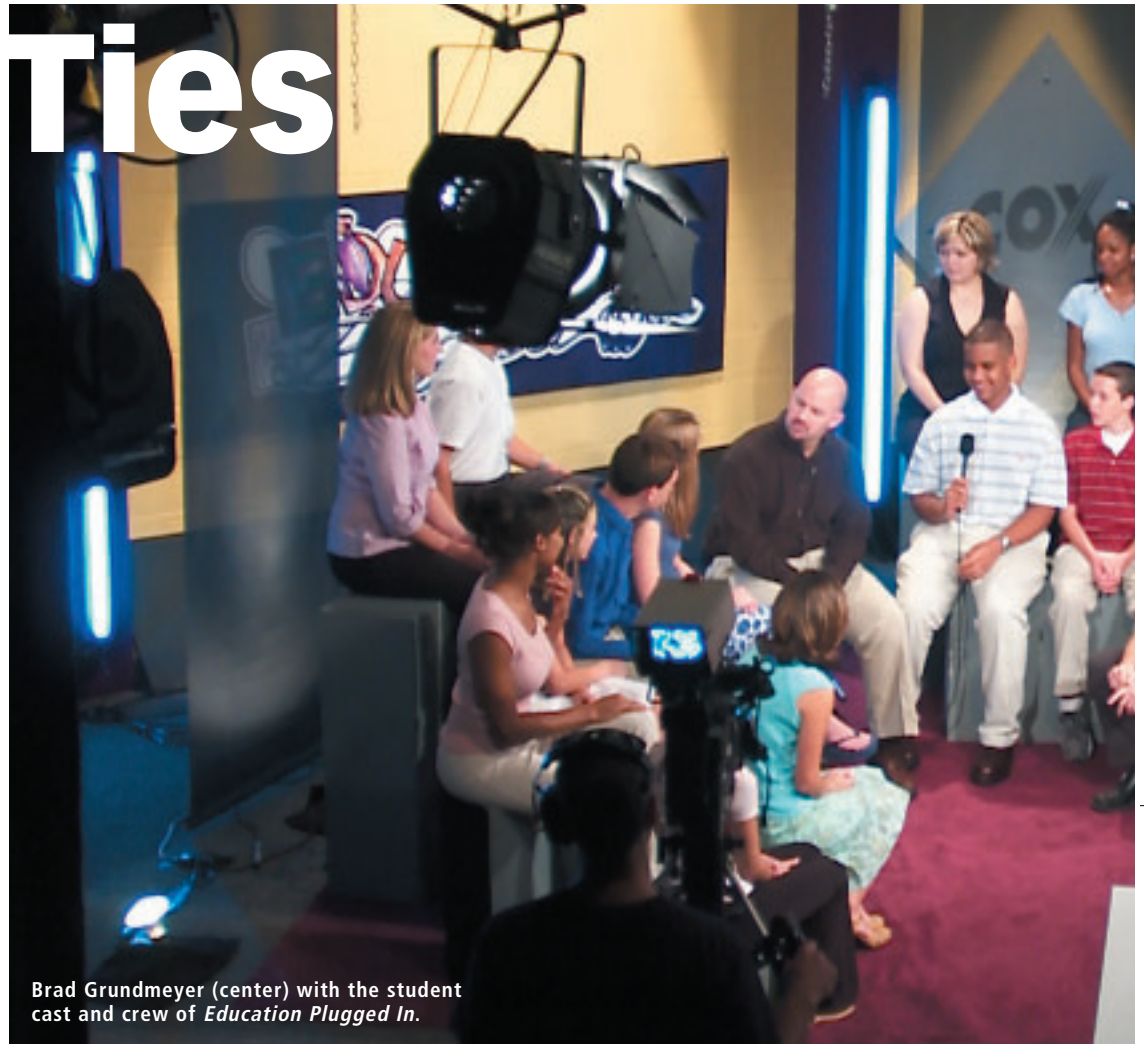
- Community members become more aware of school issues and events, and see students engaged in positive, constructive activities.
- Students build self-esteem and communicate their ideas and opinions to community members and leaders.
- Parents become more informed about and invested in what their children are learning and what schools are teaching.
- Businesses, including local cable companies, become partners with the schools.
- Community and school leaders hear student feedback on issues that directly concern them.

Want to harness the community-building power of student video production? Here are some tips from teachers, producers, and students.

1 Engage the Students

If students aren't engaged by the stories they are working on, it's unlikely that they are going to engage anyone in their community with those stories. Even when the focus of a story comes from an adult, it's important to connect it to students' interests as well, and give them as much control of the story as possible. Simply assigning stories that the teacher or the program director thinks are important is less likely to work.

For example, LaDonna Roggenbuck, a third-year teacher who leads the *Kidz Biz* program at Urban Day School in Milwaukee, initiated an interview with Milwaukee Brewers President and Chief Executive



Brad Grundmeyer (center) with the student cast and crew of *Education Plugged In*.

Officer Ulice Payne Jr. "The kids wanted to interview an important African American sports figure," she says. "I don't think they realized that the president/CEO of the Milwaukee Brewers was African American, but once they found that out, they thought, 'Ah, that might be something we can do.'" When it came time for the interview, she notes, "the questions solely came from the kids."

Time Warner Cable's *Kidz Biz* is a news program researched, written, produced, and presented by middle-school students throughout southeastern Wisconsin. While *Kidz Biz* directors assign general topics for participating schools to cover, often the best stories are the ones generated by the students' suggestions. "Last year, *Kidz Biz* asked us to do a story about a word," recalls Barbara Church, a teacher at the Horning Middle School in Waukesha, Wisc., who co-leads the school's *Kidz Biz* program with Nancy Roncke. "The students came back to me and said they'd like to do a story about instant messaging," Church says. "It was really a good piece and they came at it totally from their ideas—they wrote it, they generated it—and it turned out fabulous."

2 Keep Your Eyes and Ears Open

A chance to make a local connection is not necessarily going to come walking in the door—local story ideas come from paying attention to what's going on in the community and in the school. "My eyes are



always open,” says Roggenbuck. “I’m always thinking about what would be a good story.”

As an example, Roggenbuck cites a story about a local couple who had taken in more than 100 foster children over the years and had recently adopted a four-year-old. “That was a connection through our social worker,” she notes. “She knew these people, and she knew [my students] were looking for people who were out there doing something in their community, and so when they heard about this couple, they were really interested in learning more about them.”

3 Express Yourself

Some teachers and students may initially be nervous about asking members of the community to go on-camera, but in reality, most people are happy to participate. According to Roggenbuck, the key is to approach people professionally and enthusiastically. “I love the kids,” she says. “I’m so excited for them, and I think that energy is in my voice... I don’t usually have a problem getting people to listen and to understand. If I sound like it’s just a routine thing or I don’t really care, then you’re not going to care. People can tell if you really believe in something or not.”

Hahnville High School junior Blaine Faucheux, a current participant in Cox Communications New Orleans’ *Education Plugged In* program, offers this advice to aspiring student reporters: “Don’t hold back. If you hold back, and you don’t express yourself, then people aren’t going to realize the issues that are important to you, and what you’re thinking about your community.”

Aundrea Bailey, a senior at Destrehan High School who has been working on the show for four years, agrees. “I know when I first started the show I was nervous and I did hold back a little bit and I was timid,” she says. “But as the years have gone on, I’ve progressed on this show and I’m not afraid to express myself, so now I’m not afraid to ask questions.”

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4 Remember the Parents

Some of the most memorable stories are those that offer students an opportunity to communicate ideas about issues that they may not have otherwise talked about with their parents. After the Columbine shootings, for example, *Education Plugged In* students in New Orleans wanted to use the program as a forum to discuss their own feelings and ideas about school safety. For parents, notes Caitlyn Clark, a sophomore at Grace King High School and a current *Education Plugged In* participant, that incident “really opened their eyes to the fact

that we need more security in school.”

Blaine Faucheux’s older brother, Tommy, an *Education Plugged In* student at the time, and now an associate producer for the show, remembers that the televised discussion “kind of snowballed because we were dealing with this one act of violence, and of course it takes you down these different avenues. Then you start having a discussion on things like school uniforms, police officers walking the halls, and what role a teacher plays in shutting down conflict. From some of the feedback we received from the community, we found out that there were a lot of people listening, and some of the things that the students on that show said really hit home with parents and students alike.”

Brad Grundmeyer, the manager of public affairs at Cox who initiated the *Education Plugged In* program six years ago, says that this kind of communication is one of the key purposes of the show. “Young people can use this vehicle to discuss their thoughts and opinions, and it gives parents and adults a truly unique opportunity to get some perspective on the thoughts going on in the minds of young people.”

5 Verify the Impact

In both programs, the students’ excitement and interest often appears to be related to the degree to which they can see evidence that their involvement in the community is making a difference. “Officials in the community have started to realize what’s important to us,” says Blaine Faucheux. “Town hall meetings and things like that are usually centered around grownup opinions, and this is kind of like our town hall meeting for the kids in the community. They can kind of see what we feel is important.”

The kids are aware of television’s reach into their communities. Bailey says that because the program is available from Cox Communications throughout the area, anyone in the community is potentially a part of their audience. She’s received feedback from fellow students and teachers, and is also occasionally approached by people outside the school who recognize her from the program. “It’s interesting,” she says, when a stranger “bounds up to you happy as can be and says, ‘I saw you on TV.’”

Tommy Faucheux agrees. He says that these programs help superintendents and other school officials look at school issues from the students’ point of view. “We’ve had all of the local school superintendents on the show for one-on-one interviews as well as group discussions,” he says. “I can tell you that for the superintendent in St. Charles Parish, there are very few big decisions that he makes where he does not sit down with at least a small focus group of students.”

Related Resources

Education Plugged In

www.educationpluggedin.com

Information about the program, participating students, and special events

Educational Video Center

www.evc.org

Information about the center’s programs and ordering information for their student media production handbooks

Kidz Biz

www.timewarnerwi.com/wsp/wspDisplay.asp?DOCID=17

Complete information about the program, participating schools, and broadcast schedule

The National Alliance of Media Arts and Culture

www.namac.org

Sponsors a Youth Media Initiative to support youth media providers nationally