

# COMMUNITY

## PROJECT REPORT

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The following is a report on what occurred when two groups of high school students, one white and one third world, used videotape to explore their school. The resulting tapes revealed student reaction to their district's voluntary busing program, while this article relates the process which produced those tapes.

We first got involved in this project as a result of a proposed "evaluation" to research student attitudes toward a voluntary transfer plan which brought minority students to white schools but few, if any, whites to the sole black school. There was much tension in certain "whiter than white" communities and some hostility in the black community from fear that the district would shut down the one black stronghold.

The school district's research division intended to rely on formal interviews and questionnaires to judge their project's success, and hired a Stanford professor to do the work. He put us on to them and we came up with another approach.

We asked them to let us take randomly chosen groups of transfer and resident students at one school, give them ½" Sony portable videotape equipment, and let their findings stand as answers to the district's questions. The students, black, oriental and white, would then have a real voice in the issue and the board would have another source of information. For what it's worth, here is our formal proposal language.

Methods designed to evaluate social or educational programs rarely allow for the observations of the evaluated. Coded questionnaires and disciplined interviewers investigate program efficacy and potential for wider applicability but the impressions of the interviewed and observed are expunged for lack of precision.

We believe, however, that a necessary concomitant to any evaluation methodology is one permitting the participants to convey their own impressions of a program. A person's sense of his own environment, his selection of imagery, may provide the researcher and social planner with the kind of eyesight necessary to a more complete understanding of a project's human component. In short, we believe that a person should be an active participant in defining his own experiences. . . . It is to this end that we employ videotape. . . .

This was putting things in their language—no video jargon, no cultural speculations, no politics—and they bought it. . . . Of course our proposed budget was nothing—approximately \$500—and we assumed the entire burden of equipment and production. We also had our friend, a prominent Stanford educational evaluator, backing us up.

School districts are by nature prissy and timid but their official stamp opens some well guarded doors.

The school chosen for our experiment was the very safest in the district. It was the perfect suburban cliché. During the Cambodian upheaval, while other high schools in the area were either on strike or holding all day teach-ins, the kids at this school held a cake sale in the courtyard. The open courtyard surrounded by one-story buildings in Pentagonal arrangement was the focus of school life. Well-defined cliques gathered about. As one black kid said, it was "an ocean of white faces", peppered only by 60 some transfer kids, 31 of which were black.

The principal was extremely cordial and cooperative. He literally opened the school to us, and never once asked us what we were doing or how we were doing it after our initial conversations. He is no longer so friendly or trusting. We are still wondering why he considered us so harmless in the first place.

The manner of selecting students and introducing videotape as a perceptual tool is probably the most delicate step in the entire process, and we didn't do a particularly good job of it. First of all, we were obligated to go through official administrative channels, which is not only inherently suspect from a student's view, but generally a bad medium. No one listens to the morning bulletin, and no one drops by the office to find out what's new. Most of the students who finally came to us did so by accident—they either wanted to cut a class or were cutting a class when we got them interested.

We had planned to form the groups by walking around the school with portapaks for a few days, then selecting from among those who gravitated toward us. This approach is less suspect though conducive to bias, and in this project random selection was the key phrase. We would likely have chosen all longhairs, but that would hardly have been representative of this student body. Selection really depends on your purposes.

The resident group got caught up in the CBS interview style from the beginning, and didn't begin to see their role as active cybernators until much later. Their taping consisted of long monologues by verbose friends, short stand-off interviews with the courtyard crowd, and some excellent picturesque footage of frisbee throwers, food machines, and the school landscape. This was an extremely difficult set for them to break, given the fact that they didn't want to talk much about the project to each other and they didn't harbor strong feelings which might inspire new designs. Here's how a couple of the participants felt after the whole thing was over:



photo: Allan Frank

Ron: When John and I went out to interview, we'd go up to people we knew, you know, and. . . we'd get the people who saw us going around. . . like Apcar came up to us and wanted to talk. . . and there was someone else too. . . but mainly we talked to people we knew.

Us: Why did you do that?

Ron: I don't have a lot of nerve, just going up to anyone. . .

Us: Didn't you feel embarrassed, I mean John sounded very embarrassed when he was asking questions to people he kinda felt were going to give a silly response. . . it's our theory that if you had gone out and talked to people you really didn't know at all, you might have been more blunt and open and tried to get more information.

Ron: A couple of times, I tried going out to someone I didn't know and it was really hard to ask them questions and talk to them, because I felt that he wasn't, you know, sure, and I felt really strange.

Finally, through role playing and just sharp questions, they seemed to open up, discovering different approaches to their problem.

Roger: Well, you guys never told me what to do, I just kinda went out on my own and took what I saw, what I liked. Maybe, like, after I taped something and saw it, well, you might tell me how I might improve on it, but that's all. . . .

Us: If we were going to do that again, what would you suggest we do with other groups of kids that we didn't do with you?

Roger: Tell them more techniques of shooting. . . more about class discussions, things like that. . . even entering the community and you know, seeing what you can find.

Ron: One thing, now looking back, that I appreciate is that you didn't show us another tape. At that point, the first point, I wanted to see something else, to get some ideas, and that's when we didn't do anything, and I just started thinking about it, talked to John, and we got going. But then, I didn't know what to do. . . now I'm glad it was that way, because it was our own.

Despite their timidity and set ways, these kids produced a tape as devastating as that of the transfer group. While the black kids talked about how fragmented and dead things were, this group showed it—point blank. Most of the people they talked to either mimicked parental rhetoric, ("integration must be a slow process. . .") or, they didn't see what the problem was. (Ron: . . . As long as it doesn't affect them, it doesn't mean anything to them.) Teachers and administrators refrained from comment. (Ron: They were afraid. . . one teacher was afraid his views wouldn't agree with the people upstairs, and he might get canned. . .) No transfer student was ever interviewed. To the tune of "What a Day for a Daydream" and CSN&Y, the school was summed up by frisbee throwing and "friendly chatter" in the courtyard.

Each group spent three weeks shooting tape. The kids arranged the shooting schedules among themselves, given the liberties passed down by the principal. We stationed ourselves in a playback area, handled the equipment, and asked questions, and occasionally shot a discussion. We would attempt to generate dialogue among people who entered our domain to see themselves played back (an everyday event), but otherwise we rarely entered the process directly. One reason we think things worked out well is that the participants could fit taping into their regular school routine without much adjustment. It simply became an extension of normal daily patterns, and with the transfer group this meant the bus ride and a few scenes from back home as well as school.

The students we did attract were for the most part quiet, straight, inconspicuous kids. Only one of ten had had camera experience of any kind, and only one, a black student, could be considered a leader. We kept the groups separate and our approach to each remained fluid. *We exposed them to their own image on tape and let them put their hands on the tools immediately. After minimal instruction such as how to tell when the batteries are down, we sent them off and told them to shoot as much as they wanted for as long as they wanted. We would keep the tapes coming.*

Here some comparisons begin. The white group stayed out for two hours and shot about two minutes of tape; the black kids were back in forty minutes with a completed twenty-minute reel. Their tape was mostly shucking and jiving in front of the camera, playing with the zoom while singing and dancing, and they erased it immediately. They didn't care to learn about using the equipment or about understanding their task. They just jumped into it. We consider it now (if not then) a perfect beginning—sort of getting things out of your system. By the second day they were ready to create their own school folklore.

The resident group, those who were not bussed to school, were hesitant, almost reluctant, to accept the freedom we offered, and needed more of an initial explanation. When we asked them how they and others felt about bussing and black kids at their school, they took it as a social studies assignment. Without a direct approach and the novel hardware as a lure, we would have lost them. (We might mention that we had some fears about the success of our own project and had to resist the temptation to be pushy.)

The issue was foreign to them, since integration had but a token presence in their lives. We sensed this and adjusted the context; shoot videotape about school life in general, touching on the bussing question. If it helps, begin by talking to your friends.

The transfer kids worked well together, since they rode the same bus home everybody, lived in the same neighborhood, belonged to the same outside faction at school. The resident group broke up into teams of two and rarely came together until editing time. They were new to each other and this made it difficult to get going.

The approach of the transfer kids was bold, if not haphazard. They were practiced at roaming the school and entertaining themselves, and the camera facilitated even further explorations. The first place they toured without warning was the administration building. Three of them casually wandered from one office door to the next, off-handedly describing who and what they saw. ". . . and that is Mr. . . the principal. . . he looks pretty busy in their, probably working on something for the transfer students." ". . . and that is another counselor, Mr. . . he generally sleeps all day."

Later in the same tape, which became a propaganda piece about "This square-ass school," they entered a girls' gym class. Panning badminton courts filled with white coeds, they settled on the lone black girl in the class. This set them off. "They say we stick together. . . but look here, only one soul sister in this whole gym." "Patty, how does it feel to be the only black in the class?" "Feels kinda funny." "You know, I was talking to a counselor the other day, and she was telling me about all the opportunity. . . opportunity, hell, what kinda opportunity do we have. . . down in the ghetto." "You say it, brother. . ."

"This place has got about as much soul as the bottom of my shoe. . . can I get a picture of the bottom of my shoe. Just like Larry said, this place is as white as snow." "That's right, brother, all the soul is on the bottom!"

These kids continually used the camera to their own advantage. Tempering their initial impulse to just barge into places and start popping questions, they arranged situations in which they could both perform and confront the indigenous population.

They taped two sessions between black students and the principal concerning demands for a Black Student Union. The tapes traced the dialogue from stern refusal through patronizing concession to fists clenched in victory and proud students, white and black, planning their first group activity.

Two days in another class probing white kids about their attitudes toward black people produced a stirring confrontation between Larry, the black leader, and one of the school's leading freaks. The depths and subtleties of racism were revealed in a series of really genuine exchanges.

At this point, we felt the limitations of the project. We tried feedback sessions, turning those tapes back into the class that produced them, and igniting discussions in other classes, but we had little tape and less help. Several moving moments were unrecorded. We also wanted to interface student tapes with tapes of parents and community people, but these doors too were closed.

Editing presented the greatest problem both technically and in terms of group process. Students had to travel at night to use our borrowed Ampex 5100E. Inconvenience, waning interest and fear at the prospect of so demanding a task reduced the number of participants to a dedicated five—three transfer, two resident. (The groups were still separate but each became increasingly anxious about the other's work.)

We held several brain-storming sessions examining the tapes, talking about the various points of view, and figuring out how to best present the information in editing. They made the decisions but we performed the mechanics—a necessary result of working with borrowed equipment and limited time. We assembled segments from old format Sony ½" to Ampex 1" and suffered the rollover.

Editing in this context was almost an afterthought—a function necessary to appease those who would not find time to watch the complete four hours. Perhaps it was useful for the students to work at refining and presenting their statements but we hope to limit editing in future project designs.

Energy cycles built up through student explorations and their interactions with us and their schoolmates were dissipated by the district's control of the information. Our notion was to continue feeding tapes back into the school allowing other students to pick up on the information, if not the action. At the very least we hoped the kids involved could accompany showings in the community and at other schools to give a sense of the learning process undertaken. What actually happened after completion of the final tape aborted further efforts.

We held onto all tapes, raw and edited, consenting to copy onto other formats for the school district's purposes, and to make a dub of the edited version for ourselves. According to our verbal agreement we were then to return all tapes. Copy privilege on the raw tapes was still to be decided, but our one final tape was central to the verbal agreement.

Problems began when a casual conversation we had with a school district official turned into mutual suspicion: on our end, about permission to copy certain raw tapes, and on theirs, about ever receiving those tapes at all. (The raw tapes were not covered in the written agreement signed by the school district and the Stanford professor.) His "superior" called ours—instant delivery of the tapes resulted.

They received no other format copies and we were denied our one copy. We kept a few "white Albums", i.e., tapes made by the students on our own tapes after the project allotment had run out. We then climbed the rung to the next higher official and told him about the "white albums", told him that they had no machine in their district capable of playing the raw tapes (4 months later, they still have not been seen), and that the edited version was made on a mal-aligned Ampex so they would never get it to track properly. Finally, but most important, we told him we had undertaken the project, understanding that little money was involved, because an experiment, a process, which we believed valuable would be attempted, and we expected a copy of that effort. He was impressed by our dismal portrait of affairs, offering cautiously, "perhaps something can be worked out."

Prior to our next conversation, several weeks later, the final tapes were shown to school district administrators, including the principal of the high school involved. They liked it—began to spin off a variety of possible uses—until the principal spoke.

He said the tape portrayed "his" school unfavorably, that it reflected the bias of a few kids, that we had an inordinate influence over the outcome, that parents who saw it outside the proper context might hedge on intergration and that therefore the tape should not be shown again. He offered to write a script and help produce a new tape, "a real tape."

The principals objections prevailed. At present the final tapes will be used only in teacher training in the black and minority area and the raw tapes will just sit.

The higher official squirmed about the regrettable situation and deemed unlikely our hope that his boss would contravene his principal and release the tapes—"Perhaps in time, when things have cooled down."

He said our only access to the tape, even for a single restricted showing was to have a Phd, preferably but not necessarily in education, formally request its use, stating that he would be present at its showing.



photo: Allan Frank