

Stories of Us: Students and Film Director Collaborate

*Anti-Bullying Film Project Captivates Students—
and Gives a Glimpse of 21st Century Literacies in the Classroom*

Jackson walks by Adam in the cafeteria and purposely spills his food on Adam. Later Jackson grabs Adam's book and, despite Adam's protests, throws it out the window. A teacher asks what is going on and Adam says "Nothing."

What sounds like a typical day in school is in fact part of a 20-minute movie made by eighth-grade students and filmmaker Christopher Faull. This unique filmmaking project addresses the issue of bullying, while also involving students in 21st century literacy practices, such as working collaboratively to pose and solve problems, learning to use technology tools, thinking about cause and effect, and designing and sharing information. Using the topic of relationships and bullying allows students to incorporate their personal experiences and address issues that impact them daily, enabling students to fully engage in the learning process.

Faull first had the idea for the program, called *Stories of Us*, when he noticed that some of his best movie-making results came with young actors. Faull wondered what would happen if he used young people with no acting experience, so as an experiment, he started talking to students about what issues were most important to them. Not surprisingly, relationships and all the things that go into them, including bullying, ranked the highest on the students' lists.

Faull's experiment resulted in six movies about bullying that he made in collaboration with various classes of students in his native Australia.

Right: Franklin Middle School students Carolyn Muller and McKenzie Bonnett practice a scene before filming.



Left: Jessica Heath and Roneisha McClure collaborate in the classroom.

The Problem of Bullying

Bullying is a behavior that is difficult to discipline and that often happens out of sight of teachers. Research has shown that students often don't report it, but it can lead to poor school performance, depression, violence, and a host of other problems. Teachers don't always know what bullying looks like these days, or if they do recognize bullying they don't think it is serious or don't know how to stop it. (The National Association of School Psychologists has a list of resources at http://www.nasponline.org/resources/listinga_d.aspx). In fact, an additional movie Faull intends to make in the future will be devoted specifically to educating teachers about bullying, including how to handle a bullying situation and what systems can help address bullying.

Building on the success of the Australian film project, Faull brought *Stories of Us* to the United States this past year. He was interested in collaborating with university faculty who study the dynamics of bullying and school violence, and as a result of his academic contacts at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign (Dorothy Espelage) and University of Nebraska in Lincoln (Susan Swearer), he connected with middle schools in those towns. Franklin Middle School in Champaign, Illinois, and Irving Middle School in Lincoln, Nebraska, participated in the eight-week unit.

The filmmaking process at Franklin required significant support from both the teachers and the administration. A year before the project started,

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the school's master schedule was re-arranged so that two reading and math classes could be back to back, providing the potential for a longer period when needed during the filmmaking project. In addition, adjoining classrooms had to be found so that reading teacher Shameem Rakha and math teacher Anthony Jones could both keep an eye on the movie-making project and teach the students not immediately needed for the movie. Then Rakha, who was Franklin's main coordinator, sent out information and permission slips to 60 students, 28 of whom were chosen to participate.

Developing the Story

When he came to Illinois in September 2007, Faull first asked the students to share their experiences of bullying. As is his usual practice, Faull collected those stories and worked with students to develop one or two stories into a full plot. Each movie is the result of stories those students told Faull about their own experiences being bullied and being a bully.

"There is nothing made up," Faull told the (Champaign-Urbana, Ill.) *News-Gazette*. "It's like a jigsaw puzzle. They've given me all the pieces. I've simply constructed it into something . . . that's real to them."

"I am constantly checking with them," he says. "What would happen next? Are you sure this would happen? They are translating their own experience into a story."

The students and Faull wrote the story line, but not a full script. The story line charted the arc of the story, and included information like what characters would be involved and where the action would take place.

"I started seeing how much work it was to make a movie," says Laura Clark, who plays Izzy, one of the victim's friends in the movie. "I thought the project would be like when I was in a play: we'd write the script, then memorize it, then recite it. I also thought it would be a boring educational film. But then Chris came and it got more interesting."

Although Faull puts most of the storytelling in the students' hands, he is careful to control certain important elements. For example, any story "is intentionally structured so students can empathize with the victims," says Faull. "They are not weak or pathetic; the viewers can see that it could be anyone who is bullied."

When the students audition, Faull typically chooses pre-existing social groups to encourage the students to act naturally while being filmed.

"What I really liked", said Rakha, "was that we had students create their characters—their names, what they were like, their background, their favorite things to do, clothes to wear, who their friends were, everything."

In one case, a student who played a troubled boy who bullied others asked Rakha what would make him act like

that. He and Rakha brainstormed about what would make him so angry, and he developed the scenario used in the movie, in which the character's parents were divorcing.

When the film crew came, the students had to be ready. Just before filming, the students in a particular scene would rehearse once again and Faull would block out each scene, adding in the extras for the first time. Then Faull would shoot the scene from multiple angles. Consequently a single scene could take several hours to shoot. The rehearsal and filming took two weeks, including many hours before and after school.

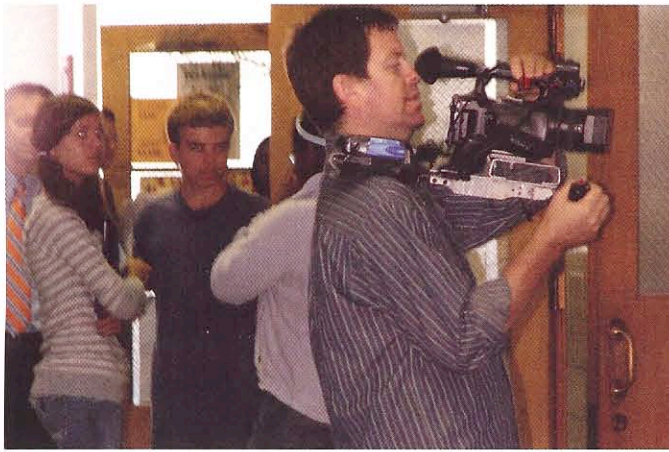
"It was insane, but a lovely insane," says Rakha.

The resulting movie includes two plot lines. In one, a girl who feels slighted starts a rumor about another girl and gets her friends to go along with it. That escalates to the point where the group arranges for the bullied girl to meet in the park with a boy she likes. They take a picture of the meeting and tease the victim by putting it on the Internet. In the second plotline, one boy starts picking on another, by shoving him in the hall and purposefully spilling food on him, throwing his book out a window, and tearing up something he had written. The victim doesn't respond until finally, goaded to his limit, he teases the bully about his parents' divorce.

Wide-Ranging Benefits

The most obvious goal of the film project was to help students develop and deliver a message about bullying and its negative impact, but that wasn't the extent of the project's influence. Rakha notes that her class also learned an enormous amount in other areas. The focus on character, plot, and audience helped students learn how to tell a coherent story and how to understand an experience from another's perspective. The group work required that they share their experiences, work together, and learn to trust one another; and the filming process exposed them to a variety of concepts, techniques, and terms used in making movies. Rakha's class even had to learn how to handle the media attention that resulted from their movie, including giving interviews to print and broadcast media and being photographed in the classroom.

As it turned out, it would be difficult to find a classroom project that better illustrates the range of skills currently termed "21st century literacies," and considered increasingly essential for academic and real-world achievement. These include dynamic activities such as building relationships, solving problems, sharing information, thinking creatively, and creating multi-media texts, and are cited in recent documents such as NCTE's "Toward a Definition of 21st Century Literacies" and the "Framework for 21st Century Learning" from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills



Director Chris Faull is shown filming for the “Stories of Us” project at Franklin Middle School, Champaign, Illinois. In the background (from left) are teacher Tony Jones and students Giselle Hernandez and Nathan Hearn.

(see box this page for web addresses).

For Franklin middle school students, though, what stood out most about their film project may have been the fact that a problem like bullying could exist without their realizing it, and that working together, they could deliver a message that would make a difference.

“Even though I was bullied a little in sixth grade, I wasn’t that concerned about bullying before we did the project,” says Akshay Krishnamani. “But when we did the movie and could act it out and be the person watching it on the director’s cut, I began to realize that bullying is really universal and is more serious than I realized.”

“The films take you on an emotional journey,” says Faull. “If the authenticity convinces the audience that this is real then you have a real chance to have behavioral changes.”

Franklin students agree.

“The movie won’t stop bullying around the world,” acknowledges Krishnamani, who played a friend of one of the bullying victims in the movie, “but if a kid in school sees the movie and it intrigues them enough to listen then it might make them want to change.”

Reaching a Wider Audience

The completed movies, with their believable characters and situations, also are powerful tools when shown to other students, educators, and the wider community. The authenticity of the movies, says Faull, is one of the most compelling parts of his approach and the one that comes from the students themselves. But he is the first to acknowledge that this project is exhausting and time consuming.

“You have to have a lot of trust in the kids” for a project like this, he adds.

Everyone, including Faull, has been pleasantly surprised at the amount of media attention *Stories of Us* has attracted. Both CBS and ABC have covered the project, as well as several major newspapers, including the *Chicago Tribune*.

But even more gratifying to Faull has been the interest from the educational community.

“The educational community really got behind the films,” he says.

The Australian Primary Principals Association put a link to the *Stories of Us* webpage on its homepage. The movies also were publicly screened numerous times. Faull’s work also has garnered interest from literacy teachers, principals, and educators concerned with bullying from as far away as England, Norway, Singapore, Japan, and Greece.

And in the United States, many education and child welfare groups also share his enthusiasm for this approach to bullying. Faull has been invited to speak at many meetings, including the National Association of School Psychologists, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the National Middle Schools Association. Faull also will be at the NCTE national meeting in November.

At the core of Faull’s vision has always been to teach literacy through the medium of movie making. With that in mind, Faull has developed a full curriculum—soon to be internationally available—which involves not just screening and discussing the movie, but numerous in-class and homework exercises. These include writing a letter to one of the victims giving him or her advice, talking in groups about how to improve the situation, making charts comparing and contrasting characters’ attributes, researching topics like cyber-bullying and creating informative pamphlets, and writing a poem, short story, or rap song about bullying. For information about the curriculum, go to www.storiesofus.com and click on “resources.”

Faull believes so strongly in his approach that in addition to the middle school projects he’s completed, he is planning both elementary- and high-school-level projects. He also has developed guidelines so other schools can shoot their own movies and upload them to the *Stories of Us* website.

The experience Faull shared with the students from Franklin will stay with them all their lives. Rakha, who was so central to the project at Franklin, was thrilled to have helped.

“This project gave my students a chance to be truly engaged in learning. What other curriculum do we have that kids have helped write?” she says. “In addition, they were given the wonderful opportunity to be part of changing the climate of American schools. How many students can say that?”

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