



## Conceptualizing Identity In Youth Media Arts Organizations: A Comparative Study

By: Erica Rosenfeld Halverson, Rebecca Lowenhaupt, **Damiana Gibbons**, and Michelle Bass

### Abstract

In this article the authors explore the relationship between concepts of identity and the purpose, process, and products of youth media arts organizations. Since the explicit mission of these organizations is to work with adolescents to explore and represent identities, the authors develop our understanding of how organizations conceptualize identity development and how these concepts shape the digital film-making process and products. In a comparative case study of In Progress (St Paul, Minnesota) and Reel Works Teen Filmmaking (New York City), organizational leaders were interviewed, and a semiotic analysis conducted of the organizations' websites and other public, printed materials. The authors analyzed the films as products of these organizations' production processes to understand how these organizations define identity and what these definitions mean for how they do their work with youth. They found two distinct conceptualizations of identity: identity as community building, and identity as individualization. Unpacking these different conceptions helps us to understand how youth media arts organizations shape the identity development process and what is made possible for participating youth. This work can also lead us to more sophisticated models of adolescent identity development, particularly for non-mainstream communities who have often been saddled with dominant cultural models that do not quite fit.

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## Conceptualizing Identity in Youth Media Arts Organizations: a comparative case study

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**ABSTRACT** In this article the authors explore the relationship between concepts of identity and the purpose, process, and products of youth media arts organizations. Since the explicit mission of these organizations is to work with adolescents to explore and represent identities, the authors develop our understanding of how organizations conceptualize identity development and how these concepts shape the digital film-making process and products. In a comparative case study of *In Progress* (St Paul, Minnesota) and *Reel Works Teen Filmmaking* (New York City), organizational leaders were interviewed, and a semiotic analysis conducted of the organizations' websites and other public, printed materials. The authors analyzed the films as products of these organizations' production processes to understand how these organizations define identity and what these definitions mean for how they do their work with youth. They found two distinct conceptualizations of identity: identity as community building, and identity as individualization. Unpacking these different conceptions helps us to understand how youth media arts organizations shape the identity development process and what is made possible for participating youth. This work can also lead us to more sophisticated models of adolescent identity development, particularly for non-mainstream communities who have often been saddled with dominant cultural models that do not quite fit.

Digital media spaces such as YouTube, MySpace, Ning, and Break.com have made sharing video representations of personal stories a common practice. Creating and sharing videos is now relatively cheap and easy to accomplish, but the ability to tell compelling life stories using digital media is a far more complex practice to master than skill-based mastery of digital tools alone. Youth media arts organizations (YMAOs) have emerged as designed spaces where youth learn to create video representations of their life stories. Research on what youth learn from their participation in YMAOs indicates that these are learning environments for multimodal production that involve identity construction. Willett et al (2005), for example, argue that 'identity' features prominently in multimodal composition: 'New media production is as much about producing identities and social spaces as it is about creating media ... Through different media forms young people are described as performing, defining, and exploring their identities' (p. 2). In fact researchers seem to agree that identity work is going on, whether youth are creating digital stories about their popular culture hero (Schneider, 2005; Hull & Katz, 2006) or playing a video game (Gee, 2003). Jenkins et al (2007) describe 'the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery' (p. 28) as one of the core media literacy skills necessary for successful engagement in twenty-first century society.

What role do YMAOs play in constructing the process of identity development for participating youth? There seems to be little disagreement *that* participation in narrative-based media production activities supports identity development. But *how* these activities support the construction of positive identities, particularly for marginalized youth, is under-explored. YMAOs engage youth in the production of various media including digital story (Hull & Nelson, 2005),

radio (Soep, 2006), digital spoken word poetry (Jocson, 2005), and film (Halverson, in press). We focus on film as an artistic medium because it affords youth the opportunity to engage in the telling, adapting, and performing of narratives of personal experience as a mechanism for positive identity development (Halverson, 2007).

We find that YMAOs scaffold the film-making process to create a learning experience through which adolescents explore identity and develop new media literacies. The research reported in this article is part of a broad study that explores youth film-making as a productive literacy practice of identity exploration and representation. While prior research indicates that YMAOs are productive spaces for marginalized youth to engage with complex issues of identity, we demonstrate empirically how 'identity' serves as a framework for understanding how youth participate in and learn from the digital film-making process. In this article, we explore the relationship between concepts of identity and the purpose, process, and products of YMAOs. We ask two interrelated research questions with the goal of clarifying the relationship between youth media arts organizational processes and identity development:

1. How do youth media arts organizations conceptualize identity?
2. In what ways do these definitions shape the art-making process and the final products?

This article begins with a brief review of YMAOs as informal learning settings where youth have an opportunity to engage in identity work. A comparative case study of two YMAOs, *In Progress* (St Paul, Minnesota) and *Reel Works Teen Filmmaking* (New York City), illustrates how organizations conceptualize 'identity development' and how this concept shapes the work youth do in these spaces. Each organization supports a distinct conceptualization of identity: (1) an interdependent, collectivist construct, and (2) identity as independent, individualized construct (Triandis, 1995). Typically, the unit of analysis for conceptualizations of identity is at the individual level (e.g. a person has either an individualist or collectivist orientation toward identity) or at the national level (e.g. Americans are individualist and Japanese are collectivist) (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Our findings indicate that YMAOs are more than just conduits for the typical American, individualistic orientation toward identity (Kim et al, 1994); rather, the organizations have their own conceptions of identity that are reflected in the purpose, process, and products of digital art-making.

### **Identity Development in Youth Media Arts Organizations**

Adolescence carries a special status in Western societies as a liminal time between childhood and adulthood, the time in our life course where issues of identity take center stage (Erikson, 1968). Adolescents negotiate how they see themselves, how others see them, and how they fit into their communities in an effort to develop a viable social identity that will carry them into a productive adulthood (Côté & Levine, 2002). Narrative is a key mechanism by which we manage our life course development; we construct narratives as a way to frame ourselves and our experiences in the world (e.g. Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1990; Heath, 2000). We tell stories of our lives to build our notions of who we are across a variety of social situations and interactions. In turn, the way we perceive ourselves to be in these social situations shapes the stories we tell (McAdams, 2001). This relationship between narrative and identity becomes especially important during adolescence, given our focus on identity during this developmental period (Cohler, 1982; Cohler & Hammack, 2007). In fact, Cohler & Hammack (2007) assert that 'the most normative feature of human development, particularly during adolescence, is its connection to discourses of identity through the formation of narratives that anchor the life course and provide meaning to conceptions of self-development' (p. 47).

Youth organizations provide adolescents with powerful opportunities for personal and interpersonal development, particularly to engage in identity development (Heath, 2000; Hansen et al, 2003; Hull & Nelson, 2005). Organizations where youth have the opportunity to actively work with their life stories in artistic storytelling processes support the development of positive identities in adolescence (Heath, 2000; Wiley & Feiner, 2001; Worthman, 2002; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Halverson, 2007, 2008a). This research has demonstrated that it is through the process of telling, adapting, and performing narratives of personal experience that adolescents engage in positive identity development.

Research on arts-based youth organizations, the broader category to which YMAOs belong, points to specific ways in which public performance of youth-created work supports positive identity development (e.g. Ball & Heath, 1993; McLaughlin et al, 1994; Heath, 2000; Soep, 2006). This process affords deep engagement with narratives of personal experience (youths' own stories and the stories of their peers), which yields two primary outcomes: (1) youth can experiment with different ways of being with limited social consequence (McLaughlin et al, 1994; Wiley & Feiner, 2001; Halverson, 2005) and (2) youth can develop complex, detypified representations of the marginalized social groups to which they belong (Halverson, 2008b).

In their community-based theatre work with youth, Wiley & Feiner (2001) describe how one of their youth participants, physically hampered by her battle with multiple sclerosis, has the opportunity to try on a different kind of physical self: 'She relished the opportunity to shed her reputation as a klutz, and the rest of the group supported her in taking on the challenge of adapting a role with few lines of dialogue but tremendous physical presence' (p. 128). Detypified understandings of marginalized social identities often manifest themselves in the choices youth make about how to represent themselves – youth often choose stereotyped images, visual tropes that make their social identities easily identifiable to an external audience (Fleetwood, 2005) to juxtapose with more idiosyncratic personal experiences. By combining typified images of social identity with individual narratives of personal experience in one artistic product, youth actively construct a viable social identity that explores the relationship between how they see themselves, how others see them, and how they fit into their communities (Halverson, 2008b).

Research on YMAOs describes positive identity construction as a key outcome for participation in digital art-making spaces (Mayer, 2000; National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture 2003; Fleetwood, 2005; Hull & Katz, 2006). The organizational missions of YMAOs often focus on working with adolescents to explore and represent identities (Fleetwood, 2005; Willett et al, 2005). Hull & Katz (2006) describe how the production of digital stories facilitates identity development for youth: 'Randy authored himself through his digital stories in agentive ways, representing himself as social critic, digital artist, and loyal son. His movies, we want to argue, were performative moments which resulted in especially intensive acts of self-articulation and self-construction' (p. 56). In fact, participatory cultures like YMAOs have become such compelling environments for youth precisely because they afford youth the opportunity to engage in the trying on and representing of multiple identities over time (Gee, 2003; Jenkins et al, 2007). The capacity to engage with complex issues of identity seems to be one of the primary reasons youth are so attracted to digital media spaces.

There is a growing body of research documenting how organizations work with youth to produce artistic, digital media. In 2003, the National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture (NAMAC) conducted a survey of 59 youth media organizations across the United States, providing background information and several detailed case studies of individual organizations. This report gives an overview of what is happening around the United States; what youth media organizations exist, their missions, their size, and the population of youth they work with. Due to its broad scope, however, the report lacks specific information about the work youth do, how they learn to do it, and what their products represent. A small group of scholars have detailed the work youth do across a variety of youth media organizations including film (Bing-Canar & Zerkel, 1998; Mayer, 2000; Fleetwood, 2005; Vargas, 2006), digital story (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Hull & Katz, 2006), spoken word digital poetry (Jocson, 2005) and radio (Soep, 2006). These studies are primarily participant observation studies, where program designers report on the work they did with a group of youth, how the process went and the products that resulted.

Interestingly, all of the organizations described in these studies have an explicit focus on working with marginalized youth. This is typical of non-profit organizations that work with youth in creative processes. For example, Wiley & Feiner (2001) describe participation in writing plays as 'opportunities for marginalized or oppressed groups to represent themselves and the world around them as a means of asserting their own identity' (p. 122). Similarly in YMAOs, the focus is often on helping marginalized youth find their voice (Bing-Canar & Zerkel, 1998; Mayer, 2000; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Fleetwood, 2005; Hull & Katz, 2006). The challenge of representing self or selves in a way that 'accurately' depicts their experiences but does not reify ethnic or racial stereotypes is discussed in many of these pieces. Fleetwood (2005) describes the goal of many of these organizations: 'youth-based media arts organizations share a common goal – a drive, that is – to

document an authentic urban experience from the perspective of racialized youth' (p. 156). The organizations in our study also work explicitly with marginalized youth; we contribute to this body of literature through an in-depth look at how YMAOs conceptualize identity and how these concepts shape the purpose, process, and products of digital film-making.

## Methods

We began our research with an exploration of an online database of youth media organizations, *ListenUp!* ([www.listenup.org](http://www.listenup.org)), that provides a network and a public forum for the online presentation of the youth-produced films. We sampled all films from the 78 non-school-based organizations registered with the site; when more than five films were available for an individual organization, we chose a random sample of five. The final sample included 236 films. We conducted a content analysis of the sample (Mayring, 2000) that focused on genre, subject, and theme. *Identity* emerged as a prominent theme through our iterative coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Drawing on Côté & Levine's (2002) description of a 'viable social identity' as a way to operationalize identity in youth products (Halverson, 2005), we labeled films as being 'about identity' if there was explicit attention paid to how youth saw themselves, how others saw them, and/or how they fitted into their communities. Among the 236 films our research team viewed, we coded 33% with this theme. Additionally, 42 of the 78 organizations whose films we viewed posted at least one film that was 'about identity'.

Guided by these results, we dug deeper into these 42 organizations, and conducted a secondary content analysis of their organizational mission statements, which were publicly available on their websites. We identified 18 organizations whose missions focused on giving youth 'a voice' and who posted youth films that focused on issues of identity. Their mission statements included explicit references to the words 'voice' and/or 'expression' as well as references to youths' place within a marginalized community (i.e. Latina youth). From their mission statements, the organizations that were categorized in this way seemed centered on teaching youth to express themselves as members of a particular community, with the goal of exploring individual issues within that community. In order to explore films (and the film-making processes) that dealt explicitly with issues of identity in greater depth, we conducted ethnographic case studies (Stake, 1995, 2000) of four organizations from our list of 18 that represented a diverse geographic sample and therefore worked with adolescents from a variety of ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. These case studies involved interviews with organizational leaders and youth, observations of the film-making process, and the collection of artifacts that trace the development of films over time, including initial essays, oral 'pitches' to professionals, initial and revised story treatments, and the film itself in various stages of editing.

Two of these four organizations are the subjects of analysis for this article: *In Progress* and *Reel Works Teen Filmmaking*. In order to answer questions about the way these organizations understand the construct of identity and how this construct is instantiated in their art-making process, we collected and analyzed the data outlined in Table I.

| Data collected  | Data analysis method  |
|---|---|
| Semi-structured interviews (Ginsburg, 1997) with organizational leaders and youth | Thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) with organizational leaders, focused on the way they describe 'identity', and the relationship between this understanding, their organization, and the film-making process   |
| Public, printed materials including website information                           | Semiotic analysis of the organizations' websites and other public, printed materials (Lemke, 2000; Burn & Parker, 2003). We are particularly interested in the <i>functional load</i> served by the different modes as representing organizational views of identity (Burn & Parker, 2003). |
| Films produced by youth participants  | Filmic analysis that uses social semiotics and formal film theory to demonstrate how youth use the tools of film to represent complex issues of identity (Halverson, in press)  |

Table I. Data collected and analytic method used across the four ethnographic case studies.

Our analysis of the films produced by participants warrants further description, as it is a method we have developed for analyzing films as products that demonstrate the construction and

representation of identity. This framework combines the features of a social semiotic analysis of a multimodal text and focuses on the specific affordances of film as the medium for meaning making. As with any qualitative analytic method where text is the data of interest, the first step in the analytic process is ‘chunking’ the data into analytically useful pieces (Wood & Kroger, 2000). We break up the youth films into *phases* and *transitions*, units of analysis that demonstrate ‘semiotic homogeneity’, internal consistency across multiple modes, for example, the same music, voiceover, and shot type. The formal analysis of films guides the development of a coding scheme within the *phase* and *transition* units. In formal analysis, films are interpreted based on the four key cinematic techniques employed by film-makers:

- *Mis-en-scene*. Anything within the frame of the camera including subject-related elements, setting, scripted features, and style.
- *Sound*. Anything you hear in the film, specifically, dialogue, sound effects, and music.
- *Editing*. The work the film-maker does after shooting is completed in order to assemble the film.
- *Cinematography*. Techniques used to alter the image seen through the camera lens.

These four modes of representation serve as the basic coding categories for the films. Using these categories to describe phases and transitions results in the creation of multilayered filmic transcripts that allow us to consider each mode individually, as well as how they connect to one another to help youth consider issues of identity in their films (Halverson, in press). The films analyzed for this article were coded by at least two independent coders and were refined until 100% agreement was reached across coders.

Taken together, these analyses paint a picture of how each organization conceptualizes identity and how this concept is instantiated in their art-making process. Before outlining our findings in the section below, we provide a profile of each organization as context for the study.

#### *In Progress*

*In Progress* (<http://in-progress.org>) is a non-profit organization based in St Paul, Minnesota, though many of their programs are run in local Minnesota communities and other small communities across the United States. The programs *In Progress* offers are community-specific, that is, tailored to the communities with which they work, and focused on marginalized youth. *In Progress* works through four initiatives:

- *The Critical Eye*, a program for inner-city teens run through their home-base location. This program serves approximately 100 youth through video and digital photography workshops on weekends in St Paul. The participants are ethnically diverse, including large groups of Hmong and Native American youth; many of these youth live in poverty.
- *Ogichidaakweg*, a digital art-making program in the Anishinaabe communities in Minnesota. The goal of this program is to work with Anishinaabe girls to help them grow into strong women through digital art production. Though the program is designed for young women, boys and girls aged 7-20 participate in the digital art-making process.
- *Living Latino*, a video production program in communities in Minnesota and Colorado. The program originated as a ‘means for facilitating dialogue about racism within the local community’ ([http://web.mac.com/in\\_progress/Community\\_Initiatives/Living\\_Latino.html](http://web.mac.com/in_progress/Community_Initiatives/Living_Latino.html)). The program expanded from Minnesota to Colorado as communities in Colorado have undergone similar demographic shifts that have resulted in large populations of Latino/a adolescents living in previously homogeneous white communities.
- In-school residency programs with three different schools in Minnesota, including the Four Directions Charter School in St Paul, where *In Progress* has been in residence for 15 years.

It is difficult to broadly characterize the work *In Progress* does, as their art-making process is different with every program and with every community. There are several unifying features across all programs, which are rooted in a belief in community-based program maintenance and growth. First, while the program’s Artistic Director oversees all of these programs, she is assisted by young artists from the community. Many of these youth artists are former *In Progress* students. And, as the programs develop, the young artists take over management and leadership of the groups of youth working in their own communities. Second, the long-term goal of these programs

is that young people will use art to help them build healthy lives in their communities. Third, *In Progress* presents itself as an organization that is literally ‘in progress’ and as an organization that is continually created by and for the members of its organization, which includes the *In Progress* staff, the communities they serve, and the youth participants. Of course, there is overlap across these three constituencies, as staff and youth participants are active members of the local communities in which the programs are run:

The name *In Progress* carries deep meaning for every artist connected to this movement. We have struggled hard to define ourselves, and in doing so we have come to realize that we are all connected, that we all have a lot to learn, and that whatever we are – here in this moment – will be influenced by the artists we meet and work with.

([http://web.mac.com/in\\_progress/Mission/Purpose.html](http://web.mac.com/in_progress/Mission/Purpose.html))

#### *Reel Works Teen Filmmaking*

*Reel Works* (<http://www.reelworks.org/>) is a New York City-based non-profit organization founded in 2001 by two film-makers interested in bringing the art of film-making to youth. Twelve new youth participants enter *Reel Works* every six months through *The Lab*, a 20-week program where adolescents write, shoot, and edit short-form documentaries about the stories of their lives or issues that are important to them. The *Reel Works* Executive Director describes the films as either autobiographical or ‘presented through an autobiographical lens’ (JW Interview, 27 July 2007). Every participant is shepherded through the process by a mentor, a professional film-maker or editor who supports that participant at every stage. Once youth complete *The Lab*, they are invited to join an advanced master class program where participants learn advanced film-making techniques, meet with professional film-makers, and create other films of a genre of their choosing. Graduates of *The Lab* can also participate in *Reel Impact*, a student-led committee dedicated to promoting and distributing *Reel Works*-produced films. *Reel Works* also offers a four-week intensive film-making summer program for youth who may not be ready to commit to *The Lab*, but who are interested in learning more about the art of film-making.

### **Findings**

Our findings are structured in terms of the three broad categories where organizations display their conception of identity: the purpose of film-making, the process of film-making, and the products of the film-making process. We begin our discussion with a consideration of the public presentation the organizations make through their websites. We argue that the websites provide a rhetorical framework for how the organizations shape the film-making process as a youth development experience. We then delve into our documentation of the film-making process itself to demonstrate how the organizations scaffold youth interaction with film-making to produce high-quality, artistic products. The film-making process of each organization highlights how conceptions of identity are present in these processes. Finally, we use two films as exemplars from each organization to analyze conceptions of identity within films produced as a result of the organizations’ film-making processes.

#### *The Purpose of Film-Making as Communicated by the Organizational Website*

The purpose for engaging in youth media production is revealed primarily through the public materials organizations make available for audiences, funders, and potential participants. Both *In Progress* and *Reel Works* make their organizational goals explicit through the formalized discourse of their websites and mission statements, which give their work a public face, as well as through organizational definitions of success. Analysis of these goals reveals a fundamental distinction between the two organizations – *In Progress* focuses its goals on developing a shared community identity, while *Reel Works* describes its purpose in terms of individual identity development.

*In Progress*. The *In Progress* website focuses on developing digital literacy as means for youth to find and express individuality as *members of a community*. The homepage of the website, titled, ‘in

progress – welcome to our website’, demonstrates this goal: the introductory text is positioned alongside a picture of a youth’s eye with what looks like a highway in the pupil and the words ‘paving the way for new voices’ superimposed underneath (see Figure 1). The image is striking and causes viewers to attend to the eye as the youth’s point of view.



Figure 1. *In Progress* home screen.

Underneath the image is text, the first that a viewer sees when they enter the *In Progress* website ([http://web.mac.com/in\\_progress/Welcome/Home.html](http://web.mac.com/in_progress/Welcome/Home.html)):

*In Progress* provides opportunities for young people to develop their skills as storytellers, artists and leaders through the use of digital media. Each year, this small non-profit partners with urban, rural, and tribal communities to provide quality mentorships that contribute to building the public voice of those least heard in our nation, serving more than 1,000 youth each year.

While this text is connected to the image through the idea of developing the voices of young people, the text moves more specifically to a group of youth, ‘those least heard in our nation’. It is important to note that these groups are described as units, not individuals. Their goal of developing a ‘public voice’ is explicitly not about individual voices but about how individual artistic voices *combine* to create the voice of a community. *In Progress* also highlights the large number of youth they serve every year, ‘over 1,000’, further building on the idea that the goal of the organization is to build the voice of whole communities.

One of the links foregrounded on this page is labeled ‘Mission’ and takes viewers to a screen titled, ‘in progress – about our work as a non-profit’. This page is structured similarly to the homepage with a large image across the top and text underneath. There are three separate images here: a young woman standing outside next to a video camera looking off into the distance (see Figure 2), contact information for the organization, and three youth jumping in a field with their hands in the air. These images give the viewer access to the faces of individual youth participants, to see who is being given a ‘public voice’ through digital art-making. The text of the mission statement ([http://web.mac.com/in\\_progress/Welcome/About.html](http://web.mac.com/in_progress/Welcome/About.html)), a crafted statement that all non-profit organizations develop and use to shape their organizational work, is printed below these images:

In Progress has been promoting the voices of young and newly developing media artists since its inception in 1996. Our mission is to *diversify cultural dialogue and pave the way for new voices in the field of media arts*. In Progress recognizes new and emerging artists from underserved communities, so they may demonstrate leadership at home while extending their voices to national audiences. (Emphasis in the original)

While many media arts organizations have as their explicit mission to work with underserved populations of youth (Fleetwood, 2005) the second half of this statement emphasizes the goal of



helping participating youth find their place within their communities. Their work as media artists should both give them the tools to become community leaders and to become spokespeople for their community to outside audiences. This unique aspect of their mission points to youth development as fundamentally about youths' place in their communities. The purpose of making films is for youth to become active members within their communities and advocates for their communities outside of them.

in progress - about or work as a non-profit

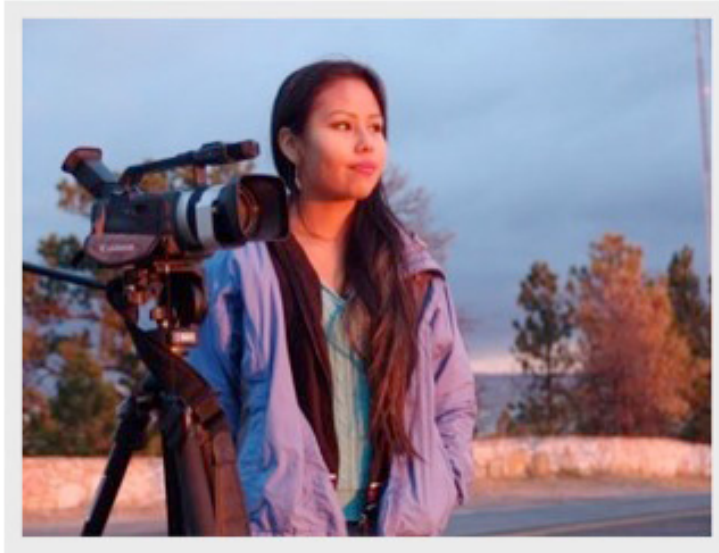


Figure 2. Image from *In Progress* mission statement page.

Success in the context of this mission involves sharing the important stories of a given community. At the most basic level, the sharing of stories results in the public acknowledgement of communities that have traditionally been marginalized and left out of the broad cultural narrative conversation. Individuals play an important role in the sharing of these stories – it is the individuals who create these digital representations of their community narratives. However, individuals matter in as much as they can contribute to these community narratives. In talking about a youth participant in the process of transitioning to program mentor and leader, the Artistic Director says, 'her potential to really do big things in her community is huge' (KS Interview, 4 December 2007). While individual youth can 'do big things', success is measured in terms of a community, its story, and the impact this story has on a broader dialogue about their marginalized group.

This purpose of film-making is emphasized through imagery and language on the website, the wording of the mission, and the organization's definitions of success. They demonstrate the goal of the organization to develop a sense of community identity, with a focus on bringing voice and sharing stories of marginalized communities. While this focus does not ignore individual participants, it positions individual development as being both in the service of and as part of the greater community.

*Reel Works*. The *Reel Works* website presents itself as an organization focused on the development of the *individual artist*. The homepage is divided vertically into two panels; each panel contributes to the story of what *Reel Works* is about. The left side – the side that is typically read first (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) – is a string of text links focused on press releases, news, corporate sponsors, and information for interested youth. This panel puts *Reel Works* as an organization at the center of its film-making work, pushing internally toward the organization rather than externally toward individual communities, as *In Progress* does. Some of these text links also reveal how structured the program is by highlighting the regularity of *Reel Works* organizational functions; links such as 'This

week at Reel Works', and the capacity to download an application for admission to the program, give the feeling that their process is standardized across groups of youth.

The right panel, which is slightly larger than the left panel, provides a space to share the individual films produced by *Reel Works* youth. The panel is dominated by a box that cycles through screenshots of various youth-produced films and includes the capacity to view any film as a streaming, QuickTime file. In this way, the products themselves, individual films made by individual youth, demonstrate their focus on the production of high-quality films as expressions of individuals' experiences.

The *Reel Works* mission statement both confirms the importance of individual youths' films and makes explicit the focus on developing individuals through the film-making process. The mission occupies a webpage of its own (<http://www.reelworks.org/mission.php>), titled 'OUR MISSION':

Reel Works Teen Filmmaking is centered on the conviction that every young person has a story to tell and an important contribution to make to our world. We believe that filmmaking holds within its essential disciplines of literacy, communication, creative and critical thinking, storytelling and teamwork that young people need to effectively express their unique visions. In the process they gain self-esteem, master state-of-the-art technology and are transformed from passive consumers to active creators of media. We say to teens: You have a voice. Use it!

This statement is accented by a filmstrip beneath it, with five still images of youth either participating in the film-making process or looking directly into the camera. These images complement the statement by providing a visual image of who these youth are and what it looks like for them to tell their stories. These images enhance the statement by literally putting a face on young people with important stories to tell (see Figure 3).

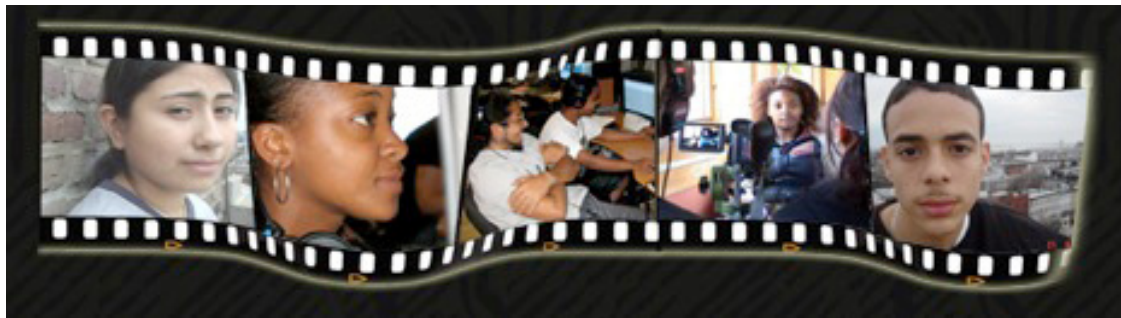


Figure 3. Image below text on *Reel Works* mission statement page.

This mission statement – the text and the images – convey a strong message about success in the *Reel Works* context: every youth tells their own unique story. This emphasis on the power of individuals sharing their stories is echoed by the Executive Director, who describes their desired program outcomes as 'great films' and 'great outcomes for the kids'. Since every participant makes their own film, these two markers of success are intimately connected with one another. Great films are described by the Executive Director as having a 'risk-taking honesty' and as 'willing to say something personal'. The ability to represent oneself in film contributes directly to the quality of the film. Likewise, creating a film that is intimate and personal leads to the kinds of outcomes for youth *Reel Works* promotes. In discussing the youth who created 'Hopeful Home', a film we will analyze later in this article, the Executive Director says:

I see a lot more confidence, a different guy, who relates to me differently for sure, he relates to the students differently, he's much more assertive – his personality – and he is proud of his film. He's proud of what he's accomplished. (JW interview, 27 July 2007)

This focus on individual identity development as evidenced by explicit perspectives on success describes a very different perspective on the purpose of the film-making experience for youth than the community-oriented focus of *In Progress*.

*Exploring the Organizational Film-Making Process*

The process of making films also helps to tell the story of how identity is understood in the context of these organizations. This includes making an individual film as well as becoming a film-maker, a process that stretches far beyond the construction of a single film. Although both organizations have a focus on youth telling their personal stories, the relationship between the individual storyteller and the digital art-making community is different across the two spaces. At *In Progress* the individual is a member of a community who participates in the representation of a broader narrative through film-making while at *Reel Works* individual youth create films based on their stories as individuals who participate in a community of film-makers. What this difference means for the process of making a film is outlined for each organization below.

*In Progress*. There is evidence to suggest that youth are inseparable from the communities of which they are a part of in the way they approach film-making. The *In Progress* Artistic Director describes the outcome of the film-making process:

Not only are you getting the story of the individual artist, but it also has this indigenous sense in that it is a collective story of the community and of the people, and of the timelessness of a lot of the stories that are within there. (KS interview, 4 December 2007)

The youth are seen as part of a people and a community. Their stories, then, reflect this view of self within community. Youths' stories are not individual stories – they are 'collective' and 'timeless'. In this way, individual experiences are inseparable from the communities to which they belong. Indeed, the film-making process itself is viewed as a community process.

Given this perspective, the *In Progress* film-making process clearly reflects a focus on the collective story. This is shown in how the Artistic Director describes four developmental stages in the film-making process and how the youth participate in them:

1. *Imitation*: youth participants '[want] to imitate what was out there in Hollywood, whether they were on the Rez or in the City'.
2. *Emulation*: youth '[look] at mass media and trying to do whatever it is, whatever is out there, but acknowledging that you are you and you're going to bring whatever you can given the resources you have'.
3. *Reaction*: youth respond to popular media and majority culture representations of their communities, which produces 'a lot of documentary work'.
4. *Autonomy*: youth '[create] for the pure joy of knowing who [they] are' (KS interview, 4 December 2007).

In theory, this developmental process could apply to an individual's trajectory as a film-maker. However, when we asked the *In Progress* Artistic Director whether all participating youth go through this trajectory to become autonomous film-makers, she replied with exactly the opposite: 'No, they are not all going to because people move, you know, and without the community ... the community can go through that process. Then anybody coming in, at any time, can be a part of that system' (KS interview, 4 December 2007). The process of making films belongs to the community, and youth participate in the community's trajectory rather than creating his or her own. This community model does not assume that individuals will not become experts at certain aspects of film-making; rather, it assumes that individuals participate fundamentally as members of a community who necessarily work together to achieve goals. What is learned is learned by the youth film-making community as a whole rather than by individual youth participants.

*Reel Works*. The *Lab* program is designed for every participant to produce an individual film. The focus is on the individual's having their own story to tell, which the Executive Director describes: 'After [the youth shoot their films], that's the hardest part because it's like herding cats. We have all these individual projects, everybody's special. And you know, it's all of these individual narratives' (JW Interview, 27 July 2007). While *In Progress* communities learn to engage in digital production, *Reel Works* participants learn the same skills and habits of mind, though they work in parallel rather than interdependently. *Reel Works* participants learn to engage in digital production in three phases:

1. *Determining what story to tell*: Youth participate in informal presentations of ideas with small groups of youth and a more formal 'pitch meeting' in front of professional film executives to

- determine the big idea of each film, whom each wants to interview, and what footage s/he will shoot in order to explicate this big idea.
2. *Shooting*: While at times youth help one another to shoot a youth's film, most often youth conduct interviews and shoot footage, scripted and unscripted, individually. Typically, an individual film-maker will shoot 10 hours of footage for a seven-minute film.
  3. *Editing*. Youth spend 50-100 hours crafting their 10 hours of footage into a single narrative, often working one-on-one with a mentor.

*Reel Works* youth participate in a community of film-makers; as individuals, they comprise this community and as a result, each cohort of the *Reel Works Lab* program is unique. The youth participate in this community as individuals on their own trajectories. The process of making films is based in the community of *Reel Works* youth; they go through the process at the same time, face similar obstacles, bounce ideas off one another, and work alongside one another to maintain a fast-paced production schedule. Despite these shared milestones and pedagogic activities, the process is fundamentally singular.

A filmic analysis of the *Reel Works*-produced film, *A Hopeful Home* (<http://www.reelworks.org/watch.php>), reveals the independent nature of this film-making process. *A Hopeful Home* is a film that describes one family's experience living in a homeless shelter after having lived most of their lives as a middle-class family. In the last scene of the film, the family leaves the homeless shelter and the film-maker's mother says, 'Hey, we made it through', then the screen fades to black. While music plays in the background, the credits roll in white text from the bottom of the screen. The first line reads: 'A Film By Ryan Bethune', indicating that he is the sole film-maker. This is followed by thanks to his mother, sister, aunt, and another *Reel Works* member, with a separate special thanks to his mentor. The Executive Producers, the founders of *Reel Works*, have their own space in the credits. The final section of credits lists all 18 organizations that had provided funding. The credits end with a screen that reads: Reel Works Teen Filmmaking, Brooklyn, NY. While the supporting community (other youth, mentors, staff, and funders) is included in the credits, the individual youth film-maker is named as the film's sole author. Full credit for the film is given to the individual, while the community serves in a supporting role (see Figure 4 for a screenshot of the credits).



Figure 4. Screenshot of the credits of *A Hopeful Home*.

Community is present in the film-making process in both organizations. For *In Progress*, a community of individuals works together to represent a collective, unique narrative. At *Reel Works*, youth create individual films in the setting of a community of film-makers. In both instances, films are created in staged sequences of activities. Youth at *Reel Works* must go through all stages in order to successfully create their film while *In Progress* youth go through the stages as a community effort without the requirement, or expectation, that all individuals will pass through each stage.

Despite their different processes, both organizations emerge with engaging and well-executed final products, the films themselves, but with a different understanding about the process in which they have engaged. In the next section, we describe how these different processes lead to the creation of different products.

*Filmic Analysis: contrasting representations of identity*

Through an analysis of two youth-produced videos, one from each organization, we demonstrate below that what are seen as successful films for YMAOs differ based on whether the organization focuses on the youth as a part of a community or as an individual. We trace the expression of identity through a filmic analysis of one film from each organization: *Life on the Reservation* and *A Hopeful Home*, described briefly above. Through this detailed filmic analysis, we show how these films demonstrate how identity is defined and expressed in youth media organizations. In *Life on the Reservation*, the focus remains on the youth as representative of a community identity, while in *A Hopeful Home*, identity is the representation of individuals' experience and how that experience has shaped the way they see themselves, the way others see them, and the way they fit into communities.

*In Progress: Life on the Reservation* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mV4QfYWcifM>). At *In Progress*, successful films tell the story of the community. As described earlier, the *In Progress* film-making process is a series of stages that the community goes through to construct a representative film. What this means for individuals in this organization is that the goal of the film-making process is to express the values and life of their own communities. As the Director explains,

That's always the goal: To get young people being free enough that they feel, if they're going to emulate, they are going to emulate the community. If they are going to imitate, they are going to imitate their older brothers and sisters. If they are going to react, they were looking at the immediate world around them ... [We tell them,] 'Look at your own stories. Look at the uniqueness of the place you live in.' They have great stories to tell.

(KS interview, 4 December 2007)

This sentiment is literally reflected in the language of the film, *Life on the Reservation*, a short-form documentary produced in 2006 on the Leech Lake Reservation. One of the film-makers, also a subject in the documentary, discusses how he used to present himself, what that meant for his family, how it inspired him to change, and how it helped those around him:

JoeJoe: I used to do a lot of grimey stuff to people and do a lot of bad stuff to myself. I watched my brothers growing up, starting to do similar things to follow me, and I didn't really like it. So I started to get my head on straight and do what was good for my little siblings and stuff.

JoeJoe is one of close to a dozen youth from the Leech Lake Reservation in Longville, Minnesota who made this film. Following short-form documentary conventions by incorporating interviews with individuals, scenes from everyday life, voiceover reflections coupled with images of life in Leech Lake, and traditional Native American music, it tells the story of their lives on the reservation. Moreover, it is filled with references to the importance of community, both one's family and the larger 'family' of the Anishinaabe people. As such, it is an expression of how individuals construct themselves as part of these communities.

A filmic analysis (Halverson, in press) of *Life on the Reservation* reveals that community identity is at the center of their message. The opening phase of the film, for example, is a three and a half minute montage that introduces viewers to the world of Leech Lake. The phase is filled with visual images, music, and voiceovers which alternate in their introduction into the film, causing us to attend to the introduction of a new element precisely because of its newness within the context of otherwise stable elements in the film (Baldry & Thibault, 2006). In the 10-second opening segment of this initial phase, the camera focuses on a young woman, shot from slightly above, who looks directly into the camera and says, 'This is our story'. We hear two other off-screen voices, and we can see in the background that she is getting ready to take a long jump into a body of water below. The handheld camera, coupled with the slightly askew camera angle, gives the impression that the viewer is sneaking a look into everyday life. As she jumps into the water, the screen goes

black and we hear a bird screech, crickets chirp, followed by traditional Native American music. Immediately following the music comes the introduction of a new visual image, a slow zoom on a road sign (Figure 5). This pattern continues throughout the initial phase, as the film alternates between the introduction of new visual and aural images that represent aspects of the Leech Lake community to the audience using all four filmic modes – mis-en-scène, sound, editing, and cinematography – independently and in combination with one another.



Figure 5. Screenshot from *Life on the Reservation*.

Voiceover is used throughout this first phase to enhance the visual imagery and explain the relationship between the images and the film-makers. The pronoun usage in these voiceovers is exclusively first-person plural ('we' and 'us'), focusing the audience on a collective community of individuals and complementing the visual elements that convey a parallel message. In this opening sequence, for example, the remainder of the phase alternates between 16 voiceover statements, all of which contain the word 'we' or 'us', and shots of either Leech Lake scenery or the people of Leech Lake. Throughout, traditional Native American music continues in the background. For example, a young woman's voice is heard saying, 'There are those who would call us lost, but what do they know'. Coupled with this voiceover is the visual image of a young man walking through a marshy field, bending over to pluck a reed from the water. His dress is American: he wears a black baseball cap, a white t-shirt, a gold chain, blue jeans, and sneakers. His image fades as the music continues to a shot of reeds blowing in a field. The image shifts again to a young woman, standing in front of a car holding a camera, facing the video camera as if she is shooting the audience. A young male voice says, 'We are proud of who we are and to be in this place we call home'. These uses of voiceover and images illustrate how the youth are defining themselves in relationship to their community and to their geographic place.

The credits also demonstrate who 'authored' the film and how these authors are displayed to the audience. While credits can be as simple as names scrolling across a black screen (as in *Hopeful Home*), in this case these names are embedded in a visual and aural narrative. Rather than giving more credit to certain individual film-makers as leaders of this film-making effort, the credits note individuals as collective creators.

The visuals begin with a long shot of a male and female youth walking down a dirt road and playfully pushing each other around during their stroll, while traditional, tribal music plays in the background. Edited into these visuals are the credits, which roll in front of the action, that read 'Written and directed by', followed by the list of all the youths' names, including all of the youth who are interviewed throughout the course of the film (see Figure 6). The entire community is

given credit for the story and the film even though the individual youth roles in the actual film-making process varied (KS Interview, 4 December 2007). Beyond the list of names, however, is the claim to community embedded in the visuals and sound that reveals much about who the film-makers want to show as responsible for this film. At the end of the credits, we hear a young voice say, 'So this is our life on the reservation, it's ours and' – the screen hard cuts to black – 'we love it. Ne gouche'. The use of pronouns *our*, *ours*, and *we* highlight the collective nature of their story and the way they view the film-making process as a representation of a communal self.



Figure 6. Screenshot of the credits from *Life on the Reservation*.

While the notion of constructing a 'viable social identity' as positive development has previously been applied to individuals (Coté & Levine, 2002; Halverson, 2005, in press), *Life on the Reservation*, as represented by the introductory phase described above, represents the construction of a *viable community identity*. The film-makers explore how they see themselves (e.g. 'We are proud of who we are ...'), how others see them (e.g. 'There are those who would call us lost ...') and how they fit into their communities (e.g. 'We are as one, we are one kind, one community, one nation'). The film itself represents the merging of these multiple representations of self, where 'self' is the Leech Lake community. Elements of all of these aspects of community identity are placed side by side throughout this phase and throughout the film. The film-makers have chosen to represent the way they see themselves and the way they want others to see them, taking into account external views of their community by ending with their own ways of seeing, talking, and believing, a hybrid of American and indigenous traditions.

*Reel Works: Hopeful Home*. *Reel Works* defines good films in terms of how the individuals define themselves as individuals. The Executive Director describes strong films produced through the *Reel Works Lab* in this way:

There is a risk-taking honesty that I think is a common factor for the films that are really strong, really courageous, willing to say something personal ... I think the films that move you ... when you transcend that form, you know of a short documentary, personal storytelling, personal narrative, some kids really do that. And it's really exciting. (JW interview, 27 July 2007)

There is an emphasis on the 'personal' in this organization, as value is placed on storytelling that is 'courageous' and 'honest' *because* it is personal. The films themselves must say something personal about the individual film-maker, and in so doing, move the audience to feel a connection with the story and the person whose story it is. *Reel Works* emphasizes individual storytelling as the primary benefit for youth participants.

The film is an expression of self that helps to build confidence in the film-maker – there is a one-to-one correspondence between the film, the story it tells, and the person who made the film. Ryan's accomplishment is *Hopeful Home*, and the film itself demonstrates the importance of the individual film-maker as the central focus as Ryan tells the deeply personal story of how his family ended up in a homeless shelter, what life was like there, and how they got out of the shelter and into a new home.

Our filmic analysis showed how *Reel Works* cinematographic and editing techniques emphasized the characters of Ryan and his mother as the foci of the film. The only faces shown throughout the film are Ryan, his mother, and one quick shot of Ryan's sister. Of the eight phases that make up this film, six focus on Ryan and his mother. The only two phases that do not show Ryan and his mother are two short phases shot with a handheld camera in black and white that show the homeless community of which Ryan and his family were a part. The grainy, handheld shots of life in the shelters do not show the faces of the people who are being filmed. In the other six phases of the film, Ryan and his mother occupy a majority of the screen time in a series of interviews: Ryan in front of a black background, sitting on a stool, looking directly into the camera and his mother sitting outdoors in front of a white wall, looking at the interviewer behind the camera. Visually dominant throughout the film, the focus is clearly on Ryan and his mother rather than the community of homeless people in the shelter.

Just as the dialogue in *Life on the Reservation* uses 'we' statements to construct representations of the Leech Lake community, 'I' and 'we' statements in *Hopeful Home* build a representation of Ryan. Yet Ryan's use of these statements constructs himself as an individual, demonstrating how he sees himself and how others see him, with a particular focus on how his mother views his struggles being homeless. For instance, the phase of the film where they discuss living in the shelter alternates hard cuts between Ryan and his mother talking to the camera:

*Ryan:* My reaction, I was just shocked. I was just like, wow, cause I never thought this would happen to us.

*Mom:* I was very concerned about Ryan because he was so angered and I was afraid that he was going to carry that anger, um, forever. And that type of thing destroys you and I didn't want to see that happen to him.

*Ryan:* Well my mother always used to tell us that we one day soon we'll be out of here. Like that this is not forever, so don't, don't become like depressed or anything.

Ryan's mother's words construct him as a young man who had been angry and who was potentially going down the wrong path. In contrast, Ryan adds images and dialogue of himself as a young man who is well spoken, calm, and willing to share his story. Ryan's choice to include both versions of himself as someone who had struggled and as someone who has overcome the struggle to become an articulate young man provides a complicated picture of Ryan as an individual. He tells a story about how individuals in his family made it through the experience of being homeless. He did not tell the story of all homeless people, nor did he craft a message to others in similar situations about how to make it through. Instead, he took a personal look at his own family's journey from despair to hope with a focus on his individual accomplishments of making this documentary and overcoming this adversity for his mother.

## Discussion

Our analysis of the purpose, process, and products of film-making suggests that the way these two organizations conceive of and carry out their work shapes how identity development as a construct is understood. At *Reel Works*, identity development is about the development of an individual's viable social identity – how they see themselves, how others see them, and how they fit into the communities to which they belong. The organizational mission, the way organizational leaders describe their work, the process of making films, and the films themselves all point to the positive development of individuals as a primary, overarching outcome of participation. This is consistent with previous research findings across youth arts organizations that work with marginalized youth to make plays (Wiley & Feiner, 2001; Worthman, 2002; Halverson, 2007, 2008a, b), digital stories



(Hull & Katz, 2006), and films (Fleetwood, 2005) of the stories of their lives. While communities, and particularly the marginalized communities to which these youth belong, have a prominent role in both the process (Halverson, 2007) and the products (Bing-Canar & Zerfel, 1998; Mayer, 2000; Fleetwood, 2005; Vargas, 2006; Halverson, in press) of digital art-making, the unit for change is the identity development of individual members of these marginalized communities.

Our work with *In Progress*, however, has caused us to rethink the inevitability of putting individuals at the center of identity development in digital art-making. Parallel evidence from this organization indicates that the concept of identity development as an individual process is not a universal construct, nor does it have to be the focus of artistic processes where youth represent their life stories. The mission of *In Progress* indicates that community identity development and preservation is a viable goal; the way organizational leaders understand the film-making process and the films themselves indicate that individuals construct identities as contributing pieces to this larger entity. What is being constructed, then, is a *community viable social identity*, the way a community sees itself, the way others see it, and the way this community fits into the larger society.

Our intention here is not to essentialize these two organizations to frame *Reel Works* as about individuals and *In Progress* as about communities. At their core, the work of these two organizations is similar: to engage youth in making films about the stories of their lives as a mechanism to engage in positive, healthy development. In our comparison of these two organizations, what we see is a complex picture emerging of how YMAOs structure the process of making films about what positive identity development means in organizations that serve marginalized communities and how organizations both shape and are shaped by this understanding of identity. The organization itself seems to play a large role in determining how youth participate in identity development by framing the work of film-making as a task of constructing either an individual or a community viable social identity.

While the films analyzed in the section above point to this conclusion, it is important to note that we chose these two films precisely because they are paradigmatic examples of the concept of identity espoused by *Reel Works* and *In Progress*. We do see evidence of the community perspective in the *In Progress* personal narrative and the individual perspective in *Reel Works*' community narrative. In future work we intend to analyze the corpus of films produced in both organizations to test empirically our assertion that these different conceptions of identity are internally consistent.

Developmental psychologists describe orientations toward identity as either individualistic or collectivistic (e.g. Triandis, 1995). In many ways, these two cultural orientations mirror the way *Reel Works* and *In Progress* shape the work of digital art-making. *Reel Works* seems to espouse an individualistic ethos, where the assertion of independence and the development of a self-concept apart from any group membership is the goal for participants. *In Progress*, on the other hand, seems to espouse a collectivistic ethos, where the goal is interdependence, to see oneself as an inseparable part of the group to which you belong (Niles, 1998). According to Markus & Kitayama (1991), the primary difference between an independent and an interdependent construct of self is the relationship between self and other: 'for the interdependent self, others are included within the boundaries of the self because relations with others in specific contexts are the defining features of self' (pp. 245-246). This difference seems to describe the ways in which *Reel Works* and *In Progress* approach their work with youth.

These conceptualizations of identity are typically discussed either as characteristics of individuals or of nationalities (i.e. Americans are individualistic and Japanese are collectivistic). Kim et al (1994) suggest that organizations like YMAOs serve as intermediate structures between individuals and national cultures that 'have been erected to maintain and propagate particular constellations of values, norms, and skills' (p. 6). In their analysis, organizations transmit identity orientations from national culture to individuals. We hypothesize that the communities in which the organizations work also shape the way these organizations construct their task; the Native American communities that *In Progress* works in bring vastly different ideas about identity to the organization than do the racially and ethnically diverse youth from New York City who come to *Reel Works*. However, we also find that the organization itself has agency in determining which orientation to identity its art-making process facilitates; and that each seems to support the

development of positive identities for participants. By working in other geographical areas, future case studies will help us to better understand this relationship.

### **Conclusion**

We began our research with YMAOs with an independent model for understanding identity development in adolescence; we theorized that digital art-making was fundamentally a process of constructing a viable social identity as a path to a positive adulthood. However, through our analysis of how two YMAOs structure the purpose, process, and products of film-making, we find that digital art-making supports both individualistic and collectivistic conceptions of identity. This insight is important to the study of YMAOs for several reasons. First, understanding this relationship helps us to develop more sophisticated models of adolescent identity development, particularly for non-mainstream communities who have often been saddled with dominant cultural models that do not quite fit. Spencer & Markstrom-Adams (1990) suggest that the dominant model for identity development that places the individual at the center 'serves as a convenient heuristic device for understanding identity processes for Anglo youth, [but] there remains a dearth of conceptual formulations for these processes among American minority youth' (p. 304). As with many developmental processes, the assumption is that the model developed to describe the way mainstream youth experience the construction and presentation of identity will non-problematically translate to non-mainstream youth. There is much evidence to suggest that these mainstream models, such as 'exploring possible selves', often do not apply to youth of color and youth with few economic resources (Oyserman et al, 1995; Phillips & Pittman, 2003).

Building this argument also helps us to understand the work that YMAOs do to engage youth who might otherwise struggle as they move into adulthood. Until now research has been overly general – participation in arts organizations is 'good for kids' – or overly specific – youth develop skills that help them to become professional artists. Likewise, research in the e-learning field has focused primarily on how to use new media to teach traditional content, rather than on what is learned from participation in new media spaces. We are aiming for something in the middle; an in-depth understanding of how YMAOs co-construct complex developmental processes with youth who otherwise would have fewer chances at successful adulthood, whatever that may look like to them and to the communities to which they belong.

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