

ers nudge our kids to become more critical media consumers, more active media makers and more engaged citizens?

HERE IN VERMONT, MemeFILMS has been experimenting with this question for more than three years. I first met veteran videographer James Valastro in 2001, as a media educator new to Vermont interested in learning more about digital video production. As we “talked story” — about media, raising our kids, and our common interest in making movies — James expressed a concern I’ve heard from so many 21st century parents: how does anyone raise children to truly appreciate media’s power in the midst of such a rapidly changing and corporately-controlled media culture?

After putting our heads together, we created MemeFILMS to work together — mixing together media literacy education (teaching individuals how to better access, analyze and evaluate media) and digital video production — and then began building working relationships with schools and nonprofits whose media-related interests overlapped our own. During the past three years, we’ve partnered with a wide variety of organizations around the state, from individual K-12 public school classrooms to the state Department of Health. We’ve also worked within a variety of time constraints, too, from “1 shot” forty-minute classes (yes, you can make some good media in a short period of time) to week-long summer camps.

We’ve not made any money doing this, as our work is mostly funded by small grants from struggling schools and nonprofits. But while our means are modest, our goals are ambitious. What we seek is to provide young people with the knowledge and skills to understand important media-related consumer, civic, and health issues — tobacco and alcohol target marketing, body image/self-esteem issues, voting and citizen participation, to name but three — that directly impact their lives. We also seek to give kids the chance to co-create media with us — as actors, writers, directors, producers, and editors.

In making and distributing digital

video that both entertains and educates, MemeFILMS focuses on both the educational “process” — how media are “constructed” and how we can understand the many ways media influence us — and the media “product,” designing high-quality digital video that holds viewers’ attention and interest. In this way, MemeFILMS tries to create media that benefits its creators (the young people and the schools with whom we work) and also can be distributed through larger networks — community cable TV networks, statewide nonprofit networks, the Internet, and “world premieres” at local movie theaters.

Before we start shooting video, we begin with media education (visit the Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME)’s web site at www.acmecoalition.org to access more media education information and resources). Teaching young people to have fun asking critical questions about existing media is an important first step in engaging kids in the need for and importance of creating their own independent stories. A Super Bowl 2005 movie trailer for Adam Sandler and Chris Rock’s film *The Longest Yard*, for example, becomes a lesson in editing, camera angles, and FX (as well as other production techniques). The trailer doubles as a vehicle for exploring stylized comedic violence and Hollywood pimping for tobacco industry product placement (both prevalent themes in corporate commercial media culture).

Once we explore some popular texts and basic questions with kids, we move on to brainstorming ideas for our own projects. As filmmakers, we walk into every class with our own ideas, and encourage our students to share theirs. Often, a good project grows out of the dialogue we have with students. And, like life, every MemeFILMS’ working arrangement and experience evolves differently, as the rules of engagement are never exactly the same.

The most important thing, though, is to get kids thinking and involved; first,

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MemeFILMS set design with our 6th grade First Assistant Director