

The Junior Producers Club: A case study of utilizing a community outreach to promote diversity, independent thinking, and music production

Dr. Christoph Thompson¹

¹ Ball State University, 2000W University Ave, Muncie IN 47306

Correspondence should be addressed to Author (cnthompson4@bsu.edu)

ABSTRACT

The *Junior Producers Club* is a successful immersive learning project that started in the fall of 2019. The project promotes inclusion, diversity, independent thinking and a reinforcement through practical application of learned material. The *Junior Producers Club* is a community outreach woven into a three-credit hour course. In close collaboration with a community partner, Ball State Music Media Production students work with high school and middle school students from a diverse background. The outreach spanned from installing a project studio, computer lab and acoustic treatment, to weekly meetings conducted by student teaching teams. The project was successful in fostering independent thinking, ability to compromise, teamwork, and engaging with culturally diverse students.

1 Inception

Immersive learning has long been a focus at Ball State University. To promote faculty engagement and the development of courses the Office of Immersive learning has developed a Provost Immersive Learning Grant. This is a grant that provides the recipient with monetary funds to purchase necessary equipment, provides a course-buyout, and offers a support infrastructure for media relations and social media presence.

The successful application for this grant was submitted with a proposed equipment budget of approximately \$8000.- including a 3 credit-hour course-buyout.

A requirement for a successful application is to have a community partner. In the case of the Junior Producers Club, this was the boys and girls club of Muncie. The boys and girls club administration had already explored ways to add a music curriculum to their after-school programs and the music production content of the proposed project was a good fit. I worked specifically with Qiana Clemens, the COO of the Muncie Boys and Girls Club. The community partner and BSU established common goals and responsibilities, in the case of the Junior Producers

Club, these were included in the following draft of the initial MOU with the Boys and Girls Club:

The community partner Buley-Center/Boys and Girls Club of Muncie Indiana hereby declares an understanding that all equipment provided by Ball State University remains the property of Ball State University and is made available as a loan for the duration of the "Junior Producers Club" immersive learning project.

The community partner furthermore guarantees that the equipment will be locked away when not in use to prevent any misuse, damage, or theft.

The community partner furthermore guarantees that during the class-times a youth counselor and/or staff will be on site to assist with any social or pedagogic questions or requirements.

Apart from the community partner, the actual community plays an important role in such and outreach, and the characteristics of the Whitley neighborhood in which the Buley Center is located had a direct influence on the program. The Whitley neighborhood is located on the Eastside of Muncie Indiana. It is considered a diverse neighborhood and is financially less affluent than neighboring communities. One of the issues the Junior Producers Club initiative was meant to address was the

opportunity to work with professional audio equipment. A neighborhood that is typically underserved and is less affluent is in greater need of such opportunities than middle class communities because most often children and adolescents of affluent households are able to purchase or have access to audio equipment. The diverse background of the community added further interest to the project because it fostered inclusion and expanded the cultural horizon of all parties involved.

The focus and goal of the initiative then was threefold: Provide an installation of a project studio with professional equipment, provide quality level training and education to middle and high school students, and lastly to do all this with a reasonable budget and at no cost to the students.

2 Phase One: Installation of the Studio

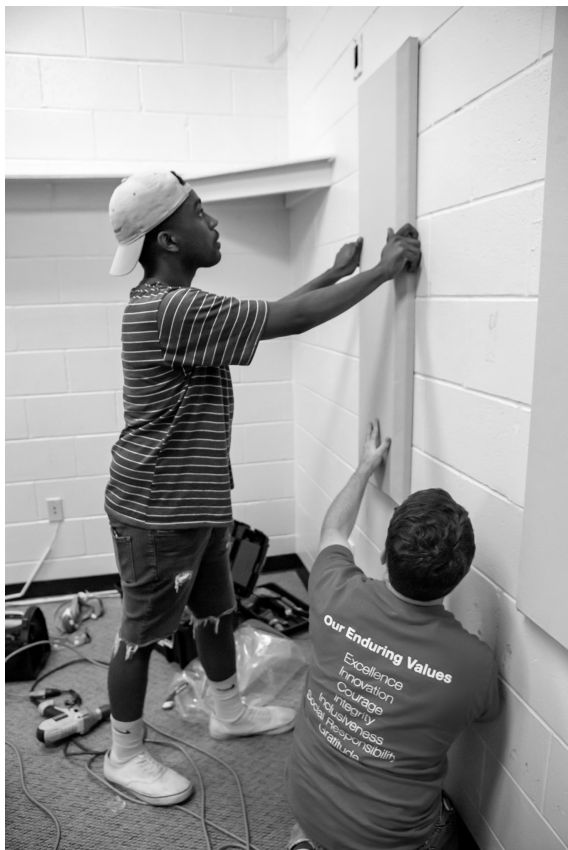


Figure 1. Installing acoustic treatment with students

The Buley center provided a dedicated space starting May of 2019. The space consisted of two adjacent rooms: One larger space of 24m² and connected through a doorway a smaller space of 7.5 m². The positive aspects of both spaces were tall, sloping ceilings descending from 5m down to 3m. The acoustic challenges to overcome were flutter echo from parallel cinderblock walls and a wall made of security glass at the front of the space. The rooms were fitted with Primacoustic® London 10 kits and Auralex® Lenrd bass traps. Careful placement allowed for significant control of the listening environment especially in the smaller room.

The studio was set up with a control room in the smaller room with in/out signal flow to the larger room that served as both a performance/recording space and computer lab. The choice of equipment to be installed was determined by three factors: Ease of use, budget, and maintenance need.

The computer lab consisted of four seats with iMacs, Audio Technica M20 headphones, and Alesis VI25 controllers with keyboard and pad triggers. Since running software licenses through Ball State for an off-campus location was bureaucratically not feasible the software used for instruction was Apple® GarageBand for Mac. Additional equipment purchases included Microphones by Audio Technica, Shure, SE and Lauten, monitor speakers by JBL and an assortment of peripherals that are listed in detail in the attached budget documents.

The console in the control room is an Analogue Mackie Onyx 4 bus mixer feeding into the AD converter through direct outs. In order to make the system as plug and play as possible the direct out was chosen over a bus routing into the computer. Using an analogue console furthermore provides preamplification as needed and a basis for basic signal flow education.

The choice of microphones was directly influenced through personal professional experience for microphones that would deliver a quality signal in less than ideal circumstances and provide a rugged built quality.

3 Phase Two: Creating a Curriculum

It is a central element to an immersive learning course that the content is to some degree student driven. For this reason, the BSU students were directly involved in creating a curriculum for the outreach sessions.

The total enrollment in the course was nine students which worked out perfectly to form three teams of three students each. While the central focus was music production, interestingly enough each team's curriculum approached the subject matter from a different angle. Team one focused on establishing very basic musical concepts as an avenue to connect understanding music to music production. Team two prioritized basic acoustics and signal flow as the basis of their curriculum, while Team three actually focused on building rapport with the students first, by exploring their musical preferences and interests. In summary the core elements of the curricula were music theory, signal-flow, and a proactive, student centered approach. The only scaffolding given by the instructor was that there should be a mid-term project to work towards and a final project.

Classes were scheduled to take place weekly in the afternoons as an after-school program. The classes were small with four students at the most, which allowed for one on one education and tutoring. Each team was scheduled to be at the Buley center twice a week for an hour each to hold classes.

4 Phase Three: Working with the Students



Figure 2. A typical class

The interaction of the Ball State MMP students with the middle school students proved to be the most dynamic phase of the project. As each team of BSU students applied their respective prepared curricula, learning occurred on both sides of the project. The MMP students are not Music Education students and beyond having taught instrumental lessons have not had any exposure to the concept of classroom teaching.

Team three, with their focus on a social connection with the students before diving into music production topics was the most successful in establishing rapport. It is important to keep in mind that the Junior Producers Club is an after-school program, which means that the students had already been to school for several hours.

The Buley center provides the students with a meal, homework time, and then whichever program they enrolled in. For the Junior Producers Club, this was daily from 5pm – 6pm. The hour of the day along with other factors influenced the attention span of the middle schoolers, so it was a good choice to keep the sessions frequent but short.

The middle schoolers took quite well to the instruction and showed creativity and interest in music production. Within the first three weeks, students who had not been exposed to a DAW were operating Apple GarageBand© fluently, using hotkeys for transport and copy/paste functions.

In terms of the yield of creative output, Team two was the most successful. This can be based on the following factors, which should be kept in mind when attempting to recreate a similar project:

Team two had a student who is highly proficient in producing hip hop/RnB style beats. This was a critical common denominator in connecting with the students and for finding an avenue for them to generate output. A non-traditional approach to learning musical structures from beats and shorter loop-based segments seemed to work best. Group 1, who approached the topic with prepared music theory and much from the standpoint of someone who had taken a form and analysis class lost the interest of students after short time intervals and had to frequently change strategies.

Team two had two students who had family members involved in either the boys and girls club or paid direct interest in the student's performance in the project. The performance of the children in Team two showed significant benefits in encouraging parents or legal guardians to participate in the project, either through listening to the student's projects after class, or actively engaging musically with the child if there is a musical background present. To keep things in perspective, it is again important to consider the specific socio-economics of the Whitley neighborhood which does hold a significant number of single-parent and working-class households. This can make it difficult for the parents to have the involvement they may desire.

Keeping a mid-term and final project as anchor points for the scaffolding of the course proved vital. It allowed the student teaching teams to vary their approach as necessary, but also keep the focus on a single outcome in the form of a palpable product. The guidelines given by the course instructor regarding both projects were simple: A short original piece of music produced by a middle school student with guidance from MMP students that showcases the concepts outlined in the respective curricula of the student teaching team.

The projects generally exceeded the expectations of the instructor in terms of musicality, and elaboration of ideas. The middle school student works were all firmly footed in the Hip Hop/RnB genre but had a significant amount of original melodic work and were, within the genre, stylistically different enough to give an interesting pool of samples. Some works were a mixture of loop-based music with rap, while others were instrumental music that was melody driven.

5 Outcomes

Especially against the backdrop of audio education and the effort of producing professional engineers the project has provided several highly useful aspects. In working in teams of three, the MMP students learned to delegate, plan, and assume roles within a team: Essential skills that transcend the course and directly apply to any pro-audio work environment. A factor that proved itself to be most interesting was the dynamic relationship between the audio students and the high and middle school students. Several aspects

contributed to this: the difference in age and experience, inconsistencies in the buy-in of the students, and lastly issues that arose because of cultural differences.

For most of the university students, the Junior Producers Club was their first exposure to teaching and mentorship. Although having been students most of their life, they were new to the concept of the lesson plan, the curriculum, and lecturing. I observed early on in the project that the groups who based their curriculum on engineering and music theory were rather dogmatic in their approach and grew frustrated when a lesson was stalled, didn't move at the planned pace, or the teaching approach didn't match the students experience level. Being able to change an approach on the fly and improvise if necessary is an essential skill of the audio engineer when working with artists and clients. Both the personal interaction in a professional environment and the flexibility to adapt to individual requirements were tested and trained throughout the project. The lesson plans became much more realistic towards the end of the project as the college students were able to adapt to the needs of the high and middle school students.

The fear of straying from a set lesson plan and being forced to improvise or break down a concept further than originally planned in my observation came from a lack of confidence on the college students' side, and the choice of some topics that were either too esoteric or too high level to teach within the context. Receiving questions and prompts to further explain a topic once a lesson was given gave the university students an understanding of the level of preparedness that is necessary to properly teach a topic. It was the necessity to break down concepts that the MMP students thought they had a thorough grasp on, that prompted them to revisit their own notes. The teaching activity thus helped the university students to truly fortify their knowledge on a topic.

In collecting feedback from the university students, the most frustration was expressed over having to change a set plan for a lesson, rewriting a curriculum, and having to deal with different levels of expertise within the same group of middle and high school students. Another frustration was dealing with students who would not work on their projects between lessons or would present sporadically.

For anyone planning a similar community outreach I want to summarize some of the realizations that will inform future iterations of the Junior Producers Club. One of the most important factors was buy-in from the university students and maintaining moral through challenges. I involved my students not only in the teaching but also in the installation of the facility. Electrical installs and computer setups were done by myself and our systems engineer Jeff Seitz but the install of acoustic treatments, the console, running lines, bringing gear to the location were all done by students. This created a sense of ownership in the MMP students and helped to maintain enthusiasm through the semester.

When working with younger students, creating a showcase of their projects at least twice a semester will keep the course focused and foster parental involvement. While the first iteration of the course had only one formal showcase of the final projects, future iterations will have both a midterm and a final project showcase.

Another important aspect was to maintain a social media presence so that parents, family, and community members would be able to follow the progress of the project and share the kids work. This was accomplished through maintaining a Facebook page that would reflect any relevant work or events. The social media presence proved vital as it also allowed the university students to showcase their activities and attracted the interest of the local press and other community entities.

The success of the project prompted the Muncie Community Schools to express the desire to incorporate the Junior Producers Club into their after-school curriculum. This was planned already for the Fall and spring of 2020, but because of the COVID19 pandemic these plans needed to be deferred until the Fall of 2021. The project will thus continue both as a community outreach at the Muncie Boys and Girls Club and an after-school program at Muncie Community Schools. I have been able to secure another Provost Immersive Learning grant and secure financing for all necessary gear and software.

6 Conclusion

In summary, a community outreach such as the Junior Producers Club can be realized in a music technology program when grants and excess equipment can be

utilized to manage the budget. Organizational reliability of community partners as well as enthusiasm in the student teachers is another vital component. If the program curriculum does not allow formation of new courses or electives, then this can be done through an AES student section as well, which was the case during the COVID19 semester. The experience is highly rewarding and provides the university student with great social and organizational skills that can be used in their respective audio careers.