



YOUTH
MEDIA
MATTERS

“WE ARE
SPY HOP.”

SHOWING
UP DURING
COVID-19

How one youth media organization persisted
in the face of an earthquake, a pandemic,
and a broken microphone.

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Photos courtesy of Spy Hop
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PREFACE

On Thursday, April 23rd, I had a scheduled call with our Spy Hop partners to discuss how we might disseminate our just-published two-year evaluation study. In normal times, we would be developing a marketing plan, but these were not normal times. We were on the precipice of a national slate of stay-at-home orders.

That is where a new conversation began. We could hear the tone of the discussion shift when the Spy Hop leadership team started to relate the course of events of the last few weeks: the intense challenges, the emotional tumult, the urgent need for new ways of implementing programs, financial concerns — all converging around the need to meet the challenge on behalf of youth. As my colleague Jacob and I listened to our Spy Hop partners, we saw their faces light up and their voices become increasingly more animated as they told us about their mentors and staff coming together to reimagine what a virtual Spy Hop could be. It became clear that we needed to document, capture, understand and tell this unfolding story in real time. We believed that by doing so, not only could Spy Hop and its constituents learn from this case study, but so could the entire field of youth-serving organizations. What is it about Spy Hop's culture and infrastructure that allowed it to respond appropriately in the moment? We hope this ethnography helps provide some answers.

—Mindy Faber
Executive Director,
Convergence Design Lab



THE SPY HOP ROBOT CHECKS OUT EQUIPMENT THROUGH SOCIAL DISTANCING.

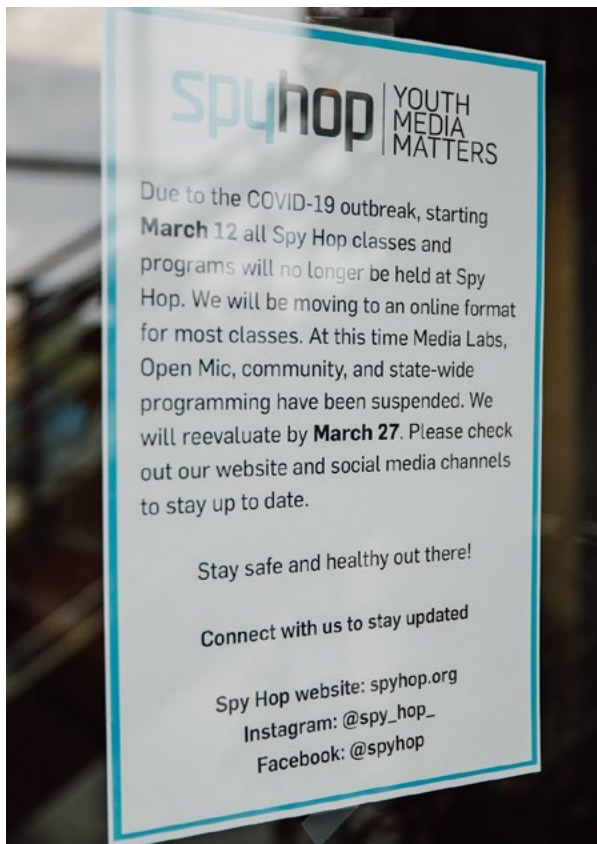
As schools and organizations shut down, Spy Hop continues to show up for its young people.

For the Salt Lake City-based media arts and youth development organization, the shift to online learning came surprisingly quick. “We made a decision earlier than I think a lot of other folks did,” said Matt Mateus, deputy director. The organization had gotten a heads-up from a friend in Hong Kong about what to expect: “This is coming and you need to be prepared,” she told them. “You lead an organization, you work with youth, you need to do this, this is not a joke.”

“The first week we were off and we were home, I was like, what are we doing? What are we supposed to do?” That’s Jeremy Chatelain, Spy Hop’s program director. It was March, the first Monday of the stay-at-home order, and to make matters worse, Salt Lake had just experienced an earthquake. “Everybody was freaked out and panicked. There was a lot of uncertainty,” Chatelain recalled. Among Spy Hop’s leadership, there were questions about money, staffing, whether they would be able to continue their work. But a message from Mateus cut through the confusion: “You need to step up, and we need to figure something out that can happen now — because it’s going to help.”

The team, led by Executive Director Kasandra VerBruggen, agreed on three things: one, they were going to do whatever they could to keep everyone on staff; two, surviving the crisis meant that taking a hiatus was not an option; and three, Spy Hop had a responsibility to continue serving and connecting with its community of young people.

Two short weeks later, they launched Rewired: a new suite of free online classes targeted to youth ages 9-19, utilizing Zoom instruction and free licenses for software like Adobe Spark and Ableton Live. The organization soon launched another new program called ArtShop: on-demand video tutorials featuring home art projects ranging from monster makeup to animation and beatmaking, aimed at parents and young people in need of dynamic learning-at-home activities.



SPY HOP CLOSES DOORS BUT NOT ITS PROGRAMS

A SMOOTH TRANSITION IN A ROCKY MOMENT

Despite its 20-year history of providing media arts training to young people, this was, in fact, Spy Hop's first foray into remote programming. Some classes proved easier to move online than others. "The video game class Power Up is doing just fine," Chatelain remarked. "We've lost a couple of kids but, for the most part, youth are participating, they're building stuff and they're kind of doing what they were doing at Spy Hop, just at home. But, you know, the band class [Musicology] has been put on hold. Any class that really required people to be together in a room has been put on hold."

For Spy Hop's artist mentors, not being able to share physical space with their students is a real loss. As Jared Gilmore, an audio mentor, put it: "You kind of need a studio to teach how to work a studio." Still, online classes are thriving, and in many cases they have even led to unexpected

delights, such as increased focus, a wider reach, and a bevy of new creative approaches to instruction. While many organizations seem to have floundered with the displacement of familiar programs, Spy Hop has managed to turn its lemons into lemonade.

Through video interviews with Spy Hop staff and mentors conducted via Zoom, we sought to understand the factors that might have contributed to their ability to succeed in this challenging moment. What follows summarizes key insights and takeaways related to Spy Hop's online learning programs during the COVID-19 crisis.

Broadly speaking, we believe that Spy Hop succeeded as a direct result of its facility with three particular organizational behaviors:

- 1:** Inventing authentic, youth-driven responses;
- 2:** Pivoting to meet evolving needs; and
- 3:** Learning on the fly in a new medium.

We hope the factors we identify here and elaborate on below might serve as a guidepost for other youth-focused organizations and provide an organizational roadmap for coping with the disruptive nature of this moment.



INSIGHT #1: Despite practical challenges, Spy Hop mobilized existing resources to invent authentic, youth-driven responses.

As the gravity of the situation came into focus, Spy Hop staffers felt a sense of intense responsibility for continuing to serve their youth safely.

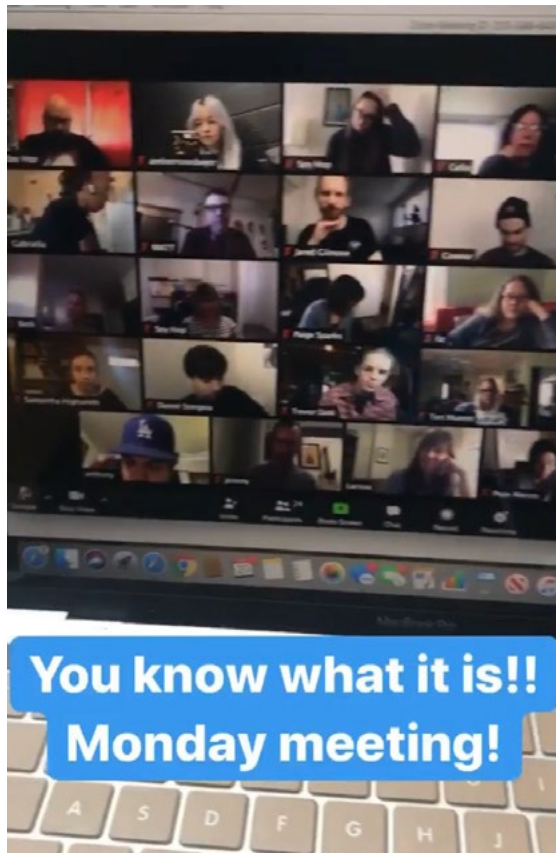
The implications of continuing to gather in person would have been catastrophic, since Spy Hop's core classes engage students from at least seven different school districts. "We are like the pandemic nightmare," said Adam Sherlock, director of community partnerships and learning design. Similarly, Gabby Huggins, a film mentor, talked about the importance of avoiding any possible spread of COVID from Spy Hop's urban hub to its more rural community partnership locations in southeastern Utah.

With the recognition that classes could no longer operate as usual, Spy Hop began the work of figuring out how to adapt.

From a practical point of view, this meant getting gear, computers and software into the hands of students. Spy Hop managed a safe-distance equipment check-out system and utilized extended free software trials from Adobe and Ableton made available during COVID-19. In addition, Spy Hop adopted other open-source applications and reduced emphasis on technical mastery in virtual activities.

For some mentors, the initial transition was fairly smooth. "The first few weeks were easier, because with pre-production for film, we can do a lot online," said Pepe Manzo, who teaches Spy Hop's Watch This and PitchNic classes. "I'm stoked at how Spy Hop handled it," shared Liz Schulte, another mentor. "We did it faster than the school districts or the governor."

THE SPY HOP WAY: A RECIPE FOR RESILIENCE



MONDAY MORNING VIRTUAL STAFF MEETING

of transparency and shared investment from leadership was key: "It feels like we're on the same team at all times," Gilmore expressed.

Community of practice

Spy Hop's mentors and staff make up a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), a group of professionals committed to working and learning together over time to improve their practice. From an organizational behavior perspective, we have observed over many years how Spy Hop has committed to an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement and learning.

An example of this dynamic is that, interestingly, the absence of physical proximity during the COVID pandemic seems to have actually resulted in an increase in communication among the Spy Hop crew. "Since the beginning of the pandemic, we started doing weekly staff meetings, but in the past it used to be every month," according to Manzo. They also started using Slack to stay in touch remotely, "so we all knew what was happening." Spy Hop's strong internal communication allowed staff to mobilize resources quickly and appears to have also increased transparency and trust between mentors and leadership.

As researchers and external evaluators, we wanted to identify the factors that allowed Spy Hop to smooth out what might have been a much rockier transition to remote learning. We asked staff directly: What were the special ingredients that helped them succeed? Was there a "secret sauce?"

Time and again, Spy Hop mentors and staff pointed back to elements in the so-called "Spy Hop Way," a four-part framework that guides decision-making and resource allocation to support authentic youth voice. Its components include youth-powered spaces, a creative community of practice, professional mentors and real-world contexts.

Full-time mentors

In visioning a new path forward for Spy Hop's largely place-based curriculum, its suite of full-time artist mentors was critical. "Our teaching staff are full-time," Mateus explained, "and they knew they had a job to do. So that's the secret sauce. It's actually not so secret." For the mentors themselves, this level

When it came to brainstorming ideas for online content, this hierarchy was notably flattened, as well. As Sherlock recalled, "I got together with the mentors of my team, and everybody said what they wanted to work on. And so we just started from there." Mateus recalled the messaging that went out to mentors on day one: "Rally the troops...we are Spy Hop."

Within the leadership, there was also a "huge level of trust" between the programming team and the staff in charge of financing and green-lighting new classes, according to Director of Marketing and Community Relations Larissa Trout. Speaking of the speed at which new ideas were able to be implemented, she remarked: "This really is happening in a way that is different, in a good way, than [how] we normally would launch something new."

Youth-powered spaces

Nevertheless, it became clear that finding ways to continue teaching as usual without access to the key ingredient of space was a challenge for several mentors. "Our gear is sort of like the lure that we use [...] and I think a lot of our mentors are really struggling to keep connection over the internet. It just doesn't feel the same," one mentor said. Sherlock agreed that Spy Hop's ultra-cool media equipment is a huge part of its success, particularly when it comes to recruitment: "The one thing we never anticipated was not being able to actually physically meet a kid in person, show him a computer and be like, 'This is cool. Right? Come with me.'"

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT:

Organizational Resilience

In *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*, Andrew Zolli (2012) invokes the term "adhocracy" to describe an organizational structure "characterized by informal team roles, limited focus on standard operating procedures, deep improvisation, rapid cycles, selective decentralization, the empowerment of specialist teams and a general intolerance of bureaucracy. [...] If it were a musical genre, adhocracy would be jazz" (p. 264-265). The key, Zolli says, is to have connection, but not too much; cognitive diversity, but not too much; and structure, but not too much. Resilient organizations also need access to good data to guide their ad-hoc decision-making practices. By bringing all hands on deck and staying in close communication with students and families, Spy Hop was able to bounce back quickly, iterating new solutions to meet the evolving needs of an uncertain moment.

Still, just because Spy Hop has moved online doesn't mean its spaces are lacking the ingenuity of youth. "It's partly a generational thing," says Trout. "You know, we have a large majority of teaching staff who are younger than me, and this is less scary for them. I mean, the world is scary, but asking them to figure out how to do an online class and put stuff online is not that scary." Gilmore, a former Spy Hop student and one of its younger mentors, agreed: "Being young and involved in the music scene, I have value in bringing change to Spy Hop."

Real-world contexts

One of the biggest challenges Spy Hop faced was how to maintain its focus on real-world contexts in an online environment. Without the endgame of live performances, exhibitions and screenings, how could Spy Hop continue to cultivate that familiar level of student buy-in?

We heard from several people that facing up to the reality of the situation was an important step. "Bring in kids [to the virtual meeting space], have them bring their pets in and talk about what's going on," Mateus advised. For him, it was "more important" that mentors maintain a sense of connection and continuity than strive for the same level of media production they would have seen pre-COVID. "We talk," said Cathy Foy, a music mentor. "We spent half of the class today talking about moving through creative blocks and having really positive conversations around self-care."



A SCREENSHOT FROM "WE'RE HERE FOR YOU," A VIDEO ANNOUNCING SPY HOP'S COMMITMENT TO OFFER FREE VIRTUAL PROGRAMMING. [HTTPS://VIMEO.COM/409891565](https://vimeo.com/409891565)

Over and over, staff and mentors talked about how critical it was to create a space for young people to process the intense reality of the current moment. Gilmore told us how his first few sessions felt more like mini-lectures, but that he “quickly realized that’s not what they wanted to hear. And so I kind of just stopped doing that and started just hanging out.” But what Gilmore described was more than just “hanging out.” Through carefully structured weekly challenges, he found a way not only to engage young media artists at distance, but to build a sense of shared community and accountability for developing their skills as artists.

Based on Spy Hop’s ability to adapt its signature model to the needs of an unexpected crisis, we wondered:

How might organizations invest in resources that prioritize authentic, sustainable and resilient program models?



INSIGHT #2: Through emotional turbulence and uncertainty, creative mindsets and dispositions allowed Spy Hop staff and mentors to pivot to meet the needs of a new normal.

As mentors began to describe to us how they translated their teaching to this new, online medium, the word that came up repeatedly was “pivoting.” They related how adjustments to their curriculum meant lowering the bar in terms of output, while finding creative ways to connect with youth and provide the resources they needed to continue creating.

The language mentors used to describe their pivots demonstrated an extreme responsiveness to the authentic and evolving needs of young people. Some explained how they had to scale down projects into smaller pieces to cope with the limitations of remote instruction and the labor-intensiveness of creating tutorial videos; others talked about how their classes evolved into new formats as they figured out what does and “doesn’t really work on a computer screen.”

"It's a pivot in a lot of ways," Huggins echoed. But what struck us most was how deeply the capacity for pivoting seemed to be ingrained in the mentors' existing approach to teaching at Spy Hop. In fact, Gilmore talked about how being successful as an artist in his field depends, in part, on this skill: "If you want to make money [as an audio engineer,] you should be able to pivot in all sorts of different directions." As Sherlock put it, the programming "started to kind of take on its own voice," reinforcing the notion that once they gave themselves permission to dream big, Spy Hop staff started to see online content evolve in all sorts of exciting new directions.

Digging deeper, it became clear that pivoting was just one of many skills and dispositions of the artist and designer that were serving Spy Hop mentors in this unique moment. Their flexibility, authenticity, emotional availability and willingness to forge ahead without concrete answers all evinced a mindset that aligned both with their work as artists and their approach as educators.



"WE JUST MISS EACH OTHER:" COMING UP AGAINST THE LIMITS OF ZOOM

An interesting discovery that we heard across conversations was that, in many cases, mentors and youth were experiencing a similar set of emotions, such as loneliness, isolation, loss. This isn't surprising: Recent **surveys by several digital learning companies** have found that significant numbers of students are feeling increasingly stressed and lonely during the pandemic. Many students just needed space to vent their frustrations.

Mentors echoed many of these emotions, even tearing up during our conversations. Several expressed disappointment that they weren't able to show up for their students as much or as easily as they might under normal circumstances. For instance, a mentor can't change topics on the fly or show a kid how to undo a mistake on their device from across the Zoom chat.

"It's very sweet, and I know that these meetings are important to them, but every time we have these meetings, it's not like in class. In class, we can be working on assignments. I can see them have breakthroughs. Those breakthroughs aren't happening in Zoom calls," Liz Schulte told us. "It's heartbreaking."

TURNING UP THE VOLUME ON ENGAGEMENT

While Zoom burnout is real, we heard from staff that the structure of the digital classroom has allowed for more focused attention in some cases. "When one person's talking, everybody listens," Chatelain explained. "Nobody's falling asleep on a Zoom call or on their phone." Chatelain believed that "kids who are really shy" were actually participating more online. For Foy, the demands of the Zoom classroom have required increased listening on the part of the mentor: "You're in this computer screen, and there's not a lot of other distractions or energy. My biggest thing is to really listen and try to absorb what they're saying and then give them an active response."

Another benefit has been the way remote learning forces students to be more self-sufficient. Even as mentors lamented the difficulty of not being able to support and guide learners more directly, they did reflect that they saw students taking on increased responsibility for their own learning. Pepe described how he has started sending students resources to solve technical problems on their own: "It's harder for me to say, 'Here's the camera, I'm going to show you where you find it.' They have to look for it themselves a little bit more." For Huggins, who works with incarcerated students, not having access to the facility has meant that some of her students have stepped up as unofficial peer mentors, to "help teach the other students how to use the gear."

CREATIVE IDEAS AND ACTIVATED FOCUS: THE UNEXPECTED DELIGHTS OF ONLINE LEARNING

While mentors made it clear that they missed teaching live in person, they did remark on a number of unexpected delights that emerged as a result of the shift to online classes. It's "a great learning opportunity" for "how to be better mentors and really get creative on how to reach the students," Manzo expressed. For Huggins, making tutorial videos for ArtShop "kind of feels like I'm a YouTuber, so that's funny and interesting."

Spy Hop staff shared how the need to pivot had actually catalyzed new ideas, or in some cases opened up space for old ideas that hadn't yet found their home in Spy Hop's suite of programming. Previously, they had tried to offer on-demand videos for teachers, but "it always felt like this really weird fit," according to Sherlock. "Once all of a sudden we were like, 'Oh, this could be something that a family could work on together at home,' it suddenly felt much more feasible. Because it seemed like, okay, you could picture one or two kids in their house with potentially a parent who's also sort of fostering that activity. It became really easy to picture who that audience was."

In Trout's words, "Our teaching staff, they're artists, they're super creative." Mateus agreed: "Right now is a time for us to go, what is possible? I want you to dream up the craziest thing you can dream up, and then let's figure out how close we can get to that."



SPY HOP USED FACEBOOK ADS TO BUILD AUDIENCES FOR FREE CLASSES.

Based on the responses of Spy Hop mentors to the real and unexpected impact of COVID-19, we asked:

How might our field nurture flexible educator mindsets that allow organizations to pivot in moments of change?

A STILL FROM CAMERON BAER'S
DOCSHOP VIDEO "REPEAT REPEAT
REPEAT," COMBINING POETRY AND FILM
TO DOCUMENT QUARANTINE LIFE.



INSIGHT #3: Spy Hop mentors practiced what they teach by learning on the fly in a new medium.

Although some students have dropped off in the transition to remote learning, for others the experience has been essential. "This is like the best thing that my kid has done in weeks," was the feedback Chatelain received from a parent recently. A key factor in this success seems to be the flexibility with which mentors have approached their new teaching medium. Learning on the fly has always been a key part of Spy Hop's curriculum. Now, it's not only the students who are experiencing it, but their mentors, too.

While existing classes have pivoted to a more informal community of practice, the newer Rewired and ArtShop courses have come to focus on smaller, simpler projects that can be completed quickly and feel satisfying, even with a small time investment. "It feels a little bit more laid back," according to Huggins.

"Simplified, simplified, simplified," was how Sherlock described it. "As a learning design exercise, this entire experience of COVID is fascinating, because it makes everyone boil everything down to one or two concepts." For Schulte, the need to simplify her curriculum represented a loss: "We are less productive. It takes longer to do very small concepts. [...] I've scaled everything back." For others,

finding simpler solutions has been a source of delight: Without a shared studio, mentors have found ways for students to improvise with ordinary materials, like creating puppets from household objects or lighting gels out of food coloring and sheets.

SUCCESS IS SHOWING UP

Across the board, when we asked about success, it was clear that participation alone was enough for mentors to feel like they were getting through to students. As Foy put it, “The fact that they all had something prepared on Wednesday, had sat down and wrote it out and then sat on a Zoom call — which we all know how awkward this can be—and played their song, I’m like, *this is really cool.*” After all, “school is not voluntary,” Liz noted, but Spy Hop is. And “they’re showing up.” For the mentors we talked with, social connections, both with their mentors and with other young people, are a vital part of what youth need to stay well right now.

The other priority for mentors was that students continue making. As it turns out, the organization has found unique ways to reach not just its usual students, but many new Spy Hoppers across the country, from coast to coast.

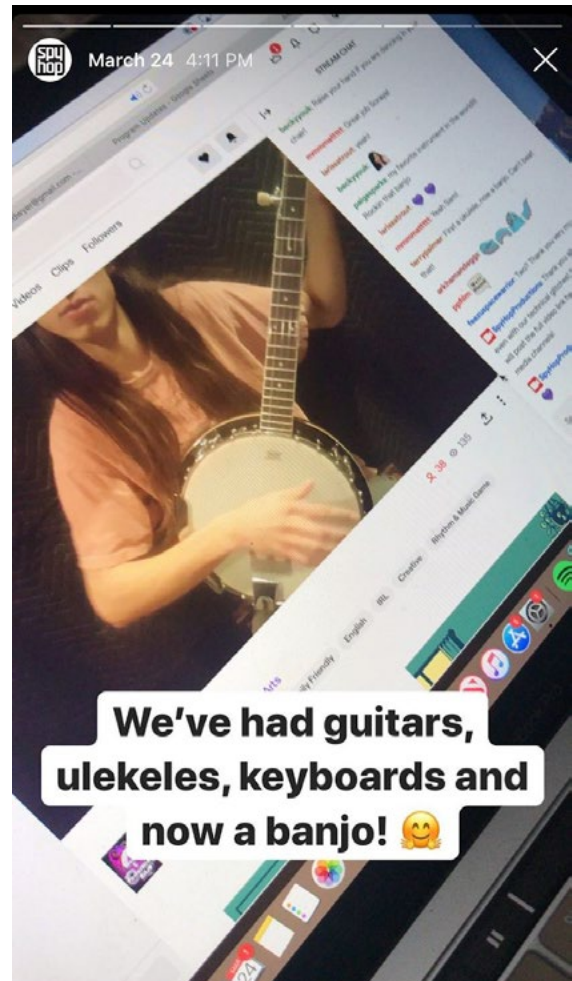
FOR ONLINE PROGRAMMING, WORD SPREADS — AND SO DO THE CONNECTIONS

AS OF JUNE 2:

Twenty-eight
REWired CLASSES
180 STUDENTS

five BEATMAKING
challenges
25 STUDENTS

ArtShop YouTube
VIEWS: 735



A STILL FROM THE FIRST LIVE STREAMING SHOW FEATURING YOUTH MUSICIANS IN THE SPRING WOODSHEDDING CLASS.

In just eight short weeks, Spy Hop's online programming reached young people far and wide. Ages on the platform range from nine to 23, with the vast majority between 11 and 16. And while most of the students hail from Utah, the program has engaged youth across the state who live in vastly different types of communities, from metropolitan areas, to suburbs, to under-resourced rural communities and Native reservations — including sites where Spy Hop runs its Voices of the West (VOW) program. Going online, it appears, has provided Spy Hop with a new opportunity to connect youth across geographical, racial and class divides. Through its offerings, Spy Hop has reached a racially diverse cross-section of youth: 34 percent were youth of color in a state that is more than 80 percent white.

Even beyond the state of Utah, youth have accessed Art Shop and Rewired from such far-flung areas as Kuna, Idaho; San Antonio; Anchorage; New Orleans; Indianapolis; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Cincinnati; Chicago; Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Las Vegas; and New York City.

Several mentors elaborated on how this expansion of geographic reach has allowed for unique connections to emerge between students from vastly different cultural contexts. Foy described a musical collaboration between a student from New York who was “very dark and artistic” and a more upbeat, positive student local to Utah. “They could not have been more different,” she recalled, and yet “the class totally worked, they totally connected.”

Huggins, who teaches filmmaking in Spy Hop's community programs, told us about the reaction of a student from rural Utah to a documentary another student made about drag history and LGBTQ issues. “I've had students in Voices of the West literally say things like, ‘Oh, there are no gay people in Blanding,’ and I'm like, ‘I don't think you know that.’” For Huggins, it's about “cross pollinating” across locations: She reminded us that her students from urban Salt Lake have plenty to learn from more rural communities, as well.

SPY HOP Sponsored

Aspiring youth filmmakers, storytellers and journalists - Spy Hop is looking for you! Certified fun and media production skills offered online for free for kids 13-19 in the Tooele area. Learn how to use basic filmmaking skills and connect with others in your community to tell your story. The first online workshop begins May 26.

VOICES OF THE WEST
STORIES SHARED BY YOUNG PEOPLE

SPYHOP.ORG
Youth Filmmakers Wanted!

Sign Up

SPY HOP REACHES OUT TO RURAL UTAH YOUTH AS PART OF ITS VOICES OF THE WEST PROGRAM.

DISRUPTION, DIGITAL DISPARITIES, AND DISTRIBUTING GEAR

Still, reaching students across these divides has not been easy. Sherlock shared how there is “a definitive wall that is built out of digital disparities in our communities and where WiFi is available and who has access to technology.” The organization wondered how it would continue to engage some of its most enthusiastic participants in the more rural VOW program, some of whom might not even have a computer at home. “We’ve had to be really realistic about what that work looks like.”



FRONT PORCH DELIVERY OF SPY HOP GOODIES

For Sherlock and for Huggins, who both teach in the VOW program, the situation with COVID has really “pulled back a curtain” they have always known was there. “[Not] having gear is a big barrier,” Huggins explained, noting one rural student who was having trouble accessing Spy Hop’s online content. “So even if he has an internet connection at home, his internet is really, really terrible. He was talking about how he has four siblings, and they have to take turns throughout the day completing their schoolwork, because their network can only handle one functioning computer at a time.”

According to a **recent Pew Research poll**, 53 percent of Americans say the internet has been essential during the COVID pandemic. For Huggins, not being able to serve certain students owing to the unequal distribution of public utilities like broadband access is “really frustrating and disheartening.”

Unexpectedly, while rural communities have been harder to reach, Spy Hop’s incarcerated participants at the Decker Lake Youth Center have been able to continue their work on the award-winning Sending Message podcast. The reason? They’re all still in one place, together, with the same WiFi situation they’ve always had. Sherlock summed up the tension in this reality: “So here are all these kids who fall underneath the umbrella of the ‘have-nots’ and we get to have access to them again, but it’s literally only because they’re still incarcerated.” Spy Hop has been able to drop off iPads, computers, cameras and other gear for these students to complete work remotely. Mentors then pick up the packages a week later and complete any necessary post-production.

Designing the technology workflow for remote learning has not been as straightforward as one might think. Even for Spy Hop’s students in urban Salt Lake who have school-issued Chromebooks, the loss of in-house equipment presents a unique challenge. “You can’t download anything on Chromebooks,” Sherlock said. “Half of them don’t even have cameras. So it’s even hard for them to get on the Zoom calls.” For that reason, instructors have tried to focus as much as possible on using web-based software.

BEATMAKING CHALLENGE

How music is taught and learned is something that mentor Jared Gilmore takes very seriously. Trained early on as a classical musician while growing up in what he describes as “a conservative Mormon suburb of Salt Lake,” Gilmore did not love the way he was taught piano. But his learning experiences took on a new dimension when, at the age of 15, he received his first exposure to experimental media at Spy Hop. His mentors, Koffi Sessi and Jeremy Chatelain (now program director for Spy Hop), exposed him to electronic music and hip hop — and he never looked back. After seven years of working as a professional musician in New York City and beyond, Gilmore is now the newest member of Spy Hop’s teaching staff. “It has all been a kind of synchronicity, just pivoting from doing a live production into teaching, which has been awesome for me.”

While not formally trained as an educator, Gilmore brings to Spy Hop his extensive experience in hybrid forms of audio, sound and music engineering, along with knowledge of how to foster collaboration in production communities. He believes in music as a vehicle of personal expression and eschews the idea of teaching, as he puts it, “to regurgitate other people’s music.”

So when Gilmore came up with the idea of the Beatmaking Challenge online class, his goal was to cultivate a true community of music producers in a space where it was safe to “break out of norms, get your hands dirty.” Gilmore said his goal in the workshop is to talk as little as possible: “This is not like school or being lectured to.”

Nevertheless, the Beatmaking Challenge class structure has proven highly effective at motivating engagement and cultivating learning that sticks. It takes place over a four-hour time frame, and a new challenge is offered on a weekly basis. After signing up, a small group of youth participants communicate through Discord prior to Zoom meetings. Then Gilmore creates a pack of 12 to 15 different sounds, some of which he creates in his own home studio with a synthesizer. On Zoom, they all run through the sounds together and then launch into a timed two-hour competition, with the goal of creating a one-minute beat using their free version of Ableton Live. After uploading their beats, they all take turns sharing and discussing and then vote on the most innovative sound.

“It’s a competition, but it’s not competitive,” Gilmore explained. The youth participants agreed: “I’ve done a few online beat challenges with a bunch of people and they’re fun, ‘cause you get new sample packs and cool beats, but this one [Spy Hop’s Beatmaking Challenge] is more fun when you are not really competing but just participating.”

The constraints and limitations imposed by a fast-paced structure appear to serve as a container for creative risk-taking. For example, the youth can only use the samples Gilmore provides, the beat can only be one minute long, and they must complete it within

the two-hour time frame. As Gilmore described, "Ableton Live is what I'm teaching mostly. And it's a monster. I've been doing it for 15 years and I still don't know everything you can do, and I will never know everything you can do. And to be like, 'Hey, nine-year-old, look at this program and like, just play with it,' nah."

The joyful learning and peer-to-peer connection that youth in the Beatmaking Challenge experience is particularly notable in the age of COVID-19. In one instance, the winning producer hailed from the far rural region of southern Utah, interacting with a whole new set of teens.

While youth describe quarantine conditions as "depressing," for a few hours of the day the Beatmaking Challenge offers an escape and a refuge. "This was the most fun I've ever had during quarantine," one youth exclaimed. "This was amazing. It's the most interaction with other producers I've had."

"You're sharing ideas, dude," Gilmore exclaimed to his students. Even in the age of COVID, authentic connection through the shared passion of music production translates in any platform.

Spy Hop's creative approach to adapting its curriculum for remote purposes caused us to ask:

How might our field create and appreciate new digital solutions that engage youth authentically at a distance, while acknowledging the real loss of in-person connection?



LEARNING AND CREATING AT HOME WITH THE HELP OF ART SHOP

CONCLUSION: *On Being Essential*

Much has been said in this time about the importance of so-called essential workers. But what does it really mean to be essential in the midst of a global crisis, a crisis not just of health and safety but of connection and community? "It's interesting to feel like I'm aware of how essential it is to be in these communities," Huggins observed. "Without Spy Hop, many kids just don't have access to this stuff—and that does feel really essential."

Huggins' comments suggest that we might understand the nature of what is "essential" in multiple ways. While Spy Hop has provided valuable resources in the midst of a crisis, it's also important to recognize the limits of such work. Trout described a recent visit by a Spy Hop staffer to a community meeting in one of Utah's more rural areas; in response to the offer of arts programming, the staffer was told, understandably: "We don't need a flyer" right now.

This tension echoes what the rabble-rousing Bread & Puppet Theatre proclaimed in 1984: "Art is food. You can't eat it, but it feeds you." This same sentiment rings out in arts education guru Maxine Greene's 1991 essay *Text and Margins*. "It is true enough that the arts will not cure a toothache," quotes Greene, from literary critic Denis Donoghue. If food, shelter and other basic needs make up the main text of our lives, Greene argues, art lives on the page's margins and is the place where we come to know and understand ourselves as full, complete beings.

While Spy Hop cannot and should not try to meet all needs faced by young people in this time, it is clear that the organization has found—or rather, reclaimed—its niche in providing a space for essential self-expression, human connection and belonging. For many of the students Spy Hop serves, these are acute needs. “The rough number that gets floated around here in Utah is that about 25 percent of students have not checked in at all online for school,” Mateus related. “And this is mostly high school. So 25 percent of high schoolers are not even checking in. That’s a massive number. If you think about 2,000 kids being in a high school, and 500 of those kids not even checking in—and [staff] don’t know where they’re at. What are they up to?”

For many of these students, Spy Hop remains a place where they can not only go to feel at home, but to find solidarity with others who are braving similarly choppy waters. “I want to go back to the literal term *spy hop*,” Mateus mused, “when a dolphin or a whale pokes its head out of the water to get a sense of what’s going on with the rest of the pod, where land is.” VerBruggen felt similarly: Spy Hop’s new, digital offerings are really an extension of what its commitment has been all along. “We’ve always done this,” she asserted. “And we always will.”

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