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Since the primary goal of CTEP is to close the digital divide, it made sense that we would do our part to help young people tell their stories online, or however they chose. Everything is done online. College and job applications, most networking, even collaborative projects done in person usually utilize online platforms like Google Suite or Slack. Through our work at the Tech Center and the Ramsey County Libraries two things became abundantly clear. One, high schools wanted to prepare youth for college by giving digital assignments. Sometimes there would be hard copies, but everything was online in order to become more accessible. Two, accessibility was only possible if the students had computers or laptops at home. Those who did not had to rely on school, tech centers, and libraries to get their homework done.

Most of these students had smartphones, primarily for communication, but many had begun to explore what was possible on the internet. TikTok, Reddit, and YouTube were easy to access and easy to consume. Making the content on those platforms was different. So the idea was formed to help students tell their stories and generate their own content to publish online. Queer students especially could find this helpful to be seen and understood.

The project began under the title: “Digital Storytelling for LGBT Youth”. The original intention was to create an afterschool program to teach technology skills such as making music, podcasting, videography, and photography. The program would run for a couple of weeks, and would end with a showcase of sorts for the teens to share the projects they had created.

Our intent was to work with high schools that had GSA clubs or similar that would meet after classes in the afternoons. Some of the group had personal connections with local schools, which we thought would provide an advantage. Additionally we thought to expand this offer to teens who may not have technology available to them outside of school, so I reached out to Avenues for Youth, a homeless shelter for young people aged 12-18 who do not have consistent shelter or accommodations. We felt that this way we would reach a variety of teenagers who would benefit from our offerings.

We began in February, making plans to reach out to high schools to find a location we could use for our after school classes. Once we had a reliable venue and knew what times we were allowed to use it, we could advertise to other schools and organizations and get the word out about our plans.

This proved to be difficult. Most of the organizations we contacted did not get back to us. The schools that did get in touch either did not have a GSA or didn't have enough students who identified openly as queer to fulfill our original purpose. After all the dead ends we kept hitting,

we tentatively made the decision to rethink the project; more specifically, our target audience. Rather than gear the project toward LGBT youth, we would broaden our scope to all young people attending the school we would partner with. We quickly restructured our goal and began to move forward with our new plans. We felt confident that we could achieve all of this by the end of June and set a date: 4 days of tech “boot camp” to be held in the mornings and afternoons at a Tech Center easy for students to travel to and well-equipped to provide multiple varieties of tech for the teens. We tentatively planned for this to take place at the Brian Coyle Center. We made these plans in the first week of March.

Things soon changed.

Two weeks later, we were suddenly all advised to work from home if possible. Libraries closed. Schools had to switch to distance learning. The plan was that the Twin Cities would shut down until May. For a month and a half, everyone was to shelter in place and then, hopefully, we would all return to daily life in the spring. So we decided to stick with our revised plan for the time being.

By mid-April, it became clear that things were not going to go back to normal. Schools were going to sustain distance learning indefinitely, the Tech Center would not reopen for a few months, and our project was not going to be completed the way we had hoped, if at all. Unfortunately, none of us had an abundance of time to adjust to this as we needed to prioritize our families, our service sites, and our own mental health during that time. By the time we were prepared to go forward with planning the new outline of our project, it was late May.

The protests and riots following the murder of George Floyd unfortunately made it much more difficult to think about anything else. The rioting got so bad in North Minneapolis that Rachel had to leave her house for a couple of days when a business next door burned down. The TC had to reconcile the fact that we were going to have to have some tough conversations with teens.

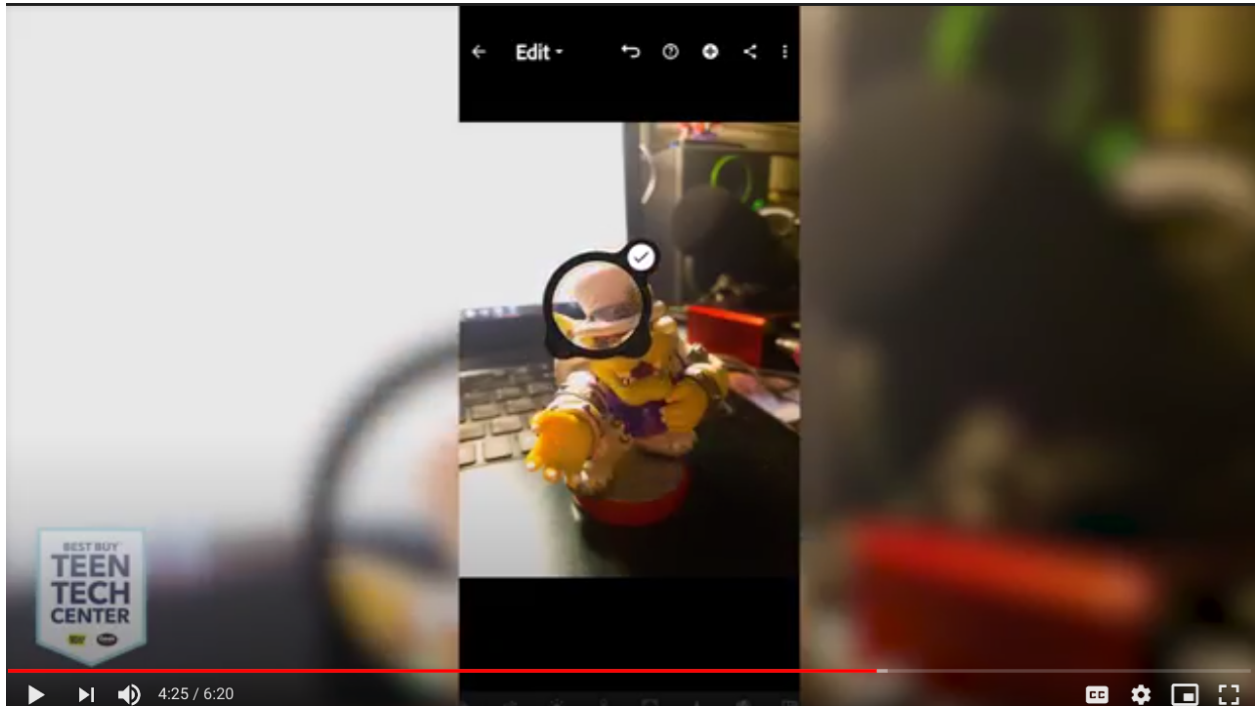
After we had time to adjust and process, we knew we needed to return to the project. By the time we were able to meet, it was clear that our project was going to be a fraction of what we had hoped. With help from Lizzie, we settled on each of us making a video covering what we had intended to teach in person. Ally made a video about Tinkercad, Devon made one about zines, Emery made one about Adobe Lightroom, and Rachel made one about Anchor.fm. With these videos we made a playlist that would be a resource to anyone of any age who wanted to make their own content.

We did not achieve our original goals. Because of everything that had occurred between March and July 2020, we were not in a position to meet with students in person. Due to social upheaval in the Twin Cities in late May, we were not able to connect properly and accomplish a

virtual teaching plan. We do feel that we were able to make four helpful videos, but we were not able to accomplish all that we'd hoped. We do hope that these videos, now published, can be a resource for someone. And who knows? After some time has gone by and schools have adapted to safely educate students, a project like this can one day be completed properly.

Through this project we learned how much some can take for granted access to technology. We were aware of the disparity between those who had computers at home and those who didn't, but it was clear how ill-equipped both schools and educational institutions were to handle distance learning during a pandemic, and only served to show how necessary our original project is. Hopefully in the future this will not be an issue, but it was eye opening to how students need to be provided for in times of crisis.

We are not sure what we would change were it in our power. As much as we enjoyed our year with CTEP it was not what we expected at all, but we are not the only ones whose expectations were not quite met. Ally, Rachel, and Devon look forward to next year and a new Civic Engagement project; we imagine upon completion of that one we will have a better understanding and perspective on how CE projects are planned and implemented. We only hope that next year we will be able to connect to the students who have the greatest need.





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