

MEMBER PROFILE

Michael Hernandez broadens students' perspectives by exposing them to diverse stories.

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He's helping students see the world through a new lens

By Nicole Krueger

When a group of high school journalists from a wealthy Los Angeles suburb landed in Cuba, they looked around in puzzlement.

“Where are the homeless people?” they asked.

They were surprised to learn that despite the country's troubled history and limited budget, its leaders had somehow managed to provide housing, health care and education for its citizens.

By upending their expectations, the trip to Cuba triggered what Michael Hernandez hopes will be a profound shift in how they see the world.

“They got to see how people live firsthand,” he says. “They got to look people in the eye and have conversations and share meals with them. They got to smell the air they breathe and live among them.

“It was transformational for the kids.”

These types of mind-expanding experiences have become a matter of course for Hernandez, a journalism adviser and chair of the award-winning media arts department at Mira Costa High School in Manhattan Beach, California. After returning from his fifth student trip to a developing nation – a travel roll that also includes Cambodia and Vietnam – he's more convinced than ever that storytelling, and the empathy it engenders, are the keys to navigating an increasingly disconnected world.

“One of biggest advantages to having students tell their stories and seek out the stories of others

is that we can build empathy,” says the 2017 winner of the ISTE Digital Storytelling Network Award. “One of the struggles we all face, especially at this point in time in our country, is the disconnect between people of different geographical regions and of different racial, gender-identifying and religious groups. We don't get each other because we don't know each other's story.

“The advantage of encouraging students to tell their story is that they also start to listen. They can see what's different, but they also can find what's universal.”

While Hernandez acknowledges that few classrooms have the opportunity to travel to a foreign country, he also sees technology as a powerful tool for connecting students digitally to the wider world. A filmmaker with a master's degree in film production from Loyola Marymount University, he's watched with interest as technology has empowered individuals to bypass the traditional publishing gatekeepers when creating and sharing their own content.

Back in 1999, when he first launched Mira Costa's film journalism program – a job that was supposed to buy him time while he figured out what to do next – publishing content was a one-way pipeline not everyone was connected to. Nearly 20 years later, technology has changed everything.



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Where film students once needed access to specialized equipment, they can now use their phones to capture and edit footage on the fly. And instead of relying on their school’s closed-circuit TV network to share their work with a limited audience, online platforms such as YouTube, Snapchat and Instagram allow them to connect, collaborate and exchange perspectives with people from around the world who also have a story to tell.

“Technology lowers the barriers to accessing information, and it lowers the barriers to being able to tell our own stories,” he says.

While that’s something to celebrate, he also sees the pitfalls his students will face as they prepare to enter a field that looks nothing like it did when he started his own career. In the age of YouTube and Twitter, teaching students to distinguish fact from hype has become more important than ever, he notes.

“For a couple of years, I thought I had taught a journalistic mindset of skepticism, searching out primary sources and vetting sources of information. But I still have trouble with some of them wanting to believe hype, wanting to question what

would normally be considered reliable sources, because they’re presented with information that feels good.”

That’s one of the reasons he’s determined to broaden their perspective by exposing them to diverse stories.

For teachers who can’t take their students overseas, there are plenty of other ways to do it, he adds. It could be as simple as using Skype or Google Hangouts to connect with another classroom elsewhere in the world – or even taking a field trip across town.

“When was the last time a teacher took a trip and spent more than an hour in a different part of the city, meeting people who live there and talking with them?” he asks.

“To truly understand, you have to interact with people who are different than you are. You can’t deny what someone is telling you when they look you in the eye and you can hear the passion in their voice.” ❖

NICOLE KRUEGER IS A FREELANCE WRITER AND JOURNALIST WITH A PASSION FOR FINDING OUT WHAT MAKES LEARNERS TICK.