THE ENGAGE PROJECT

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THE ENGAGE PROJECT

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2012

Honors Capstone Project in Multimedia Arts

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Professor Breyer-
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Capstone Project Reader: _______________________
Professor Desai- Asian Literary Studies

Honors Director: _______________________
Stephen Kuusisto, Director

Date: April 25th, 2012
Abstract

The Engage Project is a web series showcasing student experiences in high school with perspectives from different countries around the world. The site is written in html/css and was created using a combination of Dreamweaver and Photoshop CS5. The video used in the project was recorded using a Sony handicam and edited using Final Cut Pro X. The videos are hosted on Vimeo.com and are integrated into the design of the site through the use of iframes.

The purpose of the site is to share student stories about high school to current high school students, allowing them to see multiple different perspectives outside of their own realm of experience. A globalized work environment has created an increased need for students to understand and relate with others from a diverse range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Through stories students learn about varied student experiences that they can then relate with their own.

A sharing component has been included with the site in which students can share their own stories about high school and an aggregate of those responses will become a later section of the site. The process of sharing is a central element of the project and its intent.

The concept of the project came out of an extended period of trial and error, which explored the migrant experience, cultural comparisons of pedagogy, and the effects of living in a diverse community. The current project arose out of a need to provide students from isolated cultural backgrounds with an avenue in which to explore student perspectives outside the range of their own.

The project is a model for a more comprehensive set of student reflections and may later be redeveloped for another media platform.
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Advice to Future Honors Students

Be willing to think past senior year. When you turn in your Capstone in April that doesn’t have to be the end of the work you have done. The work you do here is only a stepping-stone before a serious later projects and renditions. Work hard, don’t take yourself too seriously, and take this time to imagine what your mark on the world will be. Showcase what you have discovered over the past four years and share that expression with others.
MEET SOME OF MY FRIENDS

Chapter 1: Phoenix
Actress, producer, and video extraordinaire

Chapter 2: Yiwei
Dancer, lover, and a fighter

Chapter 3: Hugh
Free spirit, death metal guitarist, and all-around photographer

Chapter 4: Jeff
Video gamer, athlete, and biotechnologiad

Message me

EPISODE 1: PHOENIX WANG

Section 1: Let's meet! Ever wonder what a day at School in China is like?

Section 2: What happens when you aren't allowed to fall in love?

Section 3: Starting a business isn't just an American thing.

Section 4: How is education different now than it was for your parents?
EPISODE 2: YIWEI WU

1. Section 1: First love can always be a little awkward.

2. Section 2: It's true! All of that studying can take a toll on your eyes.

3. Section 3: Imagine a world where nerds are in power. Impossible!

4. Section 4: Communism? Do you even know what that means?

EPISODE 3: HUGH WU

1. Section 1: Bayry Metal. Not all music in China comes from a flute.

2. Section 2: Wae! World of Warcraft, that is. Hugh would sneak out and...

3. Section 3: STFU! Note to self. Don't say that to your teacher.
"God created the giraffe, the cat, the elephant ... He has no real style, he just keeps trying things."

Pablo Picasso

Have you ever heard of transmedia? It hasn’t been around very long. In fact, most of the tools I used to build my Capstone project didn’t come into common use until about 10 or 15 years ago. Transmedia is also a relatively new concept. The term itself was coined back in 1991 as internet technology was beginning to reshape the way we tell stories. Transmedia at its best is a way of re-imagining narrative so that it is not confined to a particular medium. Usually the term is used with franchises such as Pokemon and Star Wars. These giant intellectual properties were some of the first to take an initial story arc and repurpose it for multiple forms of media. Star Wars, as you know, has a series of video games, films, theme park rides, fanfiction sites, holiday specials, book series, and action figures. The property has expanded to fit almost every type of presentation available. People not only cosplay Star Wars; they buy Star Wars phones and watch Star Wars films. Pokemon similarly grew from card game to television series to film series to game series to merchandise line. The properties continually shifted to find new markets and new means of expression.

I very much believe that we are living in the age of transmedia. People are used to hearing the same story in the theatre, on their television screen, and in the latest paperback. We are flooded with information, but that free flow of information gives us choice. In an effort to spread a message, maybe the most effective way isn’t to fix on one form of expression but instead to speak that same
story in as many ways as possible, giving people the ability to choose which medium they want to access. It doesn’t matter how an audience receives a message. The important point is that it does.

My project focused on a message. Before I tell you about how the project came about in its current form, I’d like to share with you my creative journey; specifically, how I began to fixate on a particular message and curate content around it. My message: sharing stories makes the world a better place.

I started thinking about this project during my junior year and my plan was to make a film about students from overseas and their unique experiences of “Becoming American.” I interviewed a group of students about the subject. As I listened to students talk about their experiences, I shifted focus from “Becoming American” to the more specific subject of the “American School.” What differences did these students notice in education? I interviewed two more students and met with my advisor to try to find a way to piece these all together. Here’s where transmedia comes in.

Our first idea for this project was a documentary. I would use the information I had gathered and focus on one protagonist, whom I would follow. The documentary would showcase one student’s daily life in the United States, and hopefully that would allow people to see into the life of a foreign student.

I started filming several interviews with Phoenix, the girl whose image is at the top of my project. She was extremely generous with her time, and I learned a lot about life in China from our series of interviews. I even took her to visit the nearby Henninger High School to meet with students. The students there asked
her questions about life in China and told her about their experiences as students in Syracuse. Topics ranged. We discussed marijuana, vandalism, teen pregnancy, and even the lack of youtube in China. I gathered that footage and began editing again. As I was poring through hours of school footage, I noticed something: I was doing this project a disservice by focusing only on Phoenix. I was most passionate about hearing many perspectives, not only the viewpoint of a single individual.

The most enriching part of this project has been hearing other students’ stories. As I collected interviews, each person had a unique viewpoint on their education growing up and a unique understanding of what school was like in other countries. I started out talking with past contacts but soon moved to interviewing students I had never met before. I loved hearing students’ memories of school and the ways their cultural heritage affected them growing up. I went back to my advisor and told him I was changing course. This was no longer a documentary. Instead, I would write a digital book encompassing my interviews with students. It would be like an encyclopedia of student perspectives about high school.

So, with my advisor’s approval, I started gathering multiple perspectives in order to do a comparative analysis of the Chinese School and the American School. I thought I could just get two students and interview them closely. Through that, I could compare and contrast student experiences. But, after another dozen or so hours of work, I noticed that, again, I wasn’t doing my message justice. I wanted to understand the student experience in China and compare it to
my own experience growing up. The more Chinese students I interviewed, the more I realized that it wasn’t enough to have one Chinese story. One student’s memories don’t do the experience justice when one is trying to understand a country of 1.3 billion people. Neither do isolated perceptions of the American School create a message that authentically portrays the educational system in America. So, how could I create a project that would represent high school experiences authentically? I wouldn’t need one or two profiles; I’d need dozens.

So once again, my project shifted, this time to a series of student profiles. I thought I’d develop an ibook for the iPad, which would allow me to integrate text, audio, and video into a single project. I spent two weeks developing the ibook and adding video from my interviews. I transcribed all of the interviews with the help of metaturk and planned to publish a book of transcribed interviews, along with a summary video. Maybe this would be the avenue by which I could offer student profiles in an engaging way.

I soon figured out that was not the case. First of all, my advisor told me that transcripts were not the way to go. He gently reminded me that my target audience for this type of project was a high school audience. Do high schoolers read interview transcripts? Do high schoolers read? I needed to provide something interactive, highly visual, and engaging. That would be the most effective way to share the stories of the students I had interviewed. So, I doubled down on the video aspect of my project and tried to make a digital book that was highly visual and engaging.
After finishing two profiles, I noticed the software I was using to create my digital book was having trouble handling the number of videos I was adding. An iBook isn’t meant to hold hours of video. It is meant to develop literary products that rely mostly on text. My project would need to shift once again to deal with this technical detail. As I brainstormed about possible solutions, I naturally turned to the Internet as a possible avenue of expression.

One of the main problems with my original digital book idea was the need for some type of tablet, specifically an iPad, to even watch these students’ stories. The goal of the project was to share these stories with everyone, not just those who could afford a $500 iPad. So, I spent another dozen or so hours taking my initial concept of the digital book and converting it to an Internet-based presentation.

The Internet allowed me to host video on sites like Vimeo and stream that video onto a website, as well as make it available on a tablet. Vimeo’s servers also allowed me to upload gigabytes of video (the digital book software struggled to handle anything past 800 megabytes). The Internet as a platform is also highly accessible. The barrier to entry is a web connection. If I was going to target students, this seemed like an ideal platform to reformat the project in.

And that’s where I am now. The site is complete. I have completed a section on Chinese and American student experiences. Three Chinese students and an American speak about their High School Experiences. I then offer a reflection page, where I comment on the similarities of experiences within a certain country and offer information about the country’s current state of
development in 2012. Through all of that trial and error, I have found a platform where I believe I can express the experiences of these students effectively.

But why this? Why does it matter what school was like for Yiwei Wu or Phoenix Wang? Who cares about Jeff and his experiences growing up in a Jewish area in Long Island? Why do these experiences need to be shared at all? The answer to this question is one of the most important lessons I have learned in college thus far. I’ve discovered that it isn’t enough that a story be told. The power comes from its continual retelling. You may have heard the idea that there are only seven basic literary plots. Only seven basic concepts provide us with the vast wealth of storytelling that we witness in the 21st century, a more prolific literary world than in any other time in history. Only seven plots take us from *Romeo and Juliet* to *MTV Cribs*. The point isn’t to come up with a new story. Every story at its core has already been told. The power is in the retelling. And, as a culture, we are shaped by the stories we choose to retell.

Consider recent national events, such as Jeremy Lin’s rise in the NBA and Barak Obama’s presidency. These moments in history matter because they represent a depiction of Asian and African Americans that has never been broadcast on so broad a scale. Jeremy Lin broke through the stereotype of the Asian male as effeminate and intellectual. By doing so, he became a role model for a new generation of young Asians and Asian Americans. Obama’s story changed the playing field in the United States. Race, at least in terms of black and white, still mattered, but that barrier between races was weaker than it ever was before. These stories are racial equalizers. They remind us that the place where
we were born or the color of our skin isn’t the defining factor. We become who we are through our own merits.

The more a Chinese student can hear about the experiences of a Norwegian student or an American student or an African student, the more familiar with each other they will become. The more people from different races connect personally with one another, the more capacity each has for communication and compassion. I am reminded of the challenge of multicultural acceptance every day.

One of the hurdles I still face in my life is my discomfort when initially meeting people of color. I have black friends that I know well, but I still get stressed out when a random black man walks by me on the street. I don’t even think about it. I just subconsciously raise my guard and my pulse quickens. Why? Ironically, part of it’s a fear of being racist.

I spent two weeks during my Sophomore year in a class about anti-colonialism before I dropped out. In the class, I had muttered to a friend, “Let’s learn about Black people.” The teacher heard me and asked to meet with me after class. We met in his office, and he went on to harangue me about how that kind of language had no place in the classroom and that I was being insensitive to other students. Please take note: I didn’t make any racial slur. He was reprimanding me for, albeit sarcastically, saying, “Let’s learn about Black people” in the middle of a class about imperial history as seen from an African perspective. I dropped the class with even more confusion about the race issue.
My confusion resurfaced when I was part of a class about the American School. Before class one day, I asked a Black student on on a panel why Black students, as a group, continually decided not to take challenging courses in high school. Was it motivation, culture, intellect? Now that I look back on these moments in my life, I look on them as learning experiences. In this case, I was making the same mistake I made recently when I tried to tell the story of the Chinese high school experience with the voice of a single interviewee. I was trying to understand why so many Black students performed poorly in school by asking that one student. In a sense, I was asking him to become the representative for every Black person in the United States. This kind of question also assumed that it was possible to place all people of color in one category, instead of understanding that every racial group is extremely diverse. My teacher pointed me to books about the ways in which Black students are more likely to come from poorer communities; parents take multiple jobs just to stay afloat, and many children grow up without a father and a mother. I understood these arguments, but it still didn’t explain to me why every time I saw a black man I literally got stressed out.

I think my teacher had made the same mistake I had. We’re trying to understand a larger issue by looking at it as a larger issue. The way I have discovered how to deal with this fear is not through an understanding of a larger ethnic community. It is through a focus on an individual student and his individual struggles. It’s the process of not instinctively seeing someone of another race and automatically forming opinions about them. Instead, I try to take
the time to recognize the diversity of race and the ways in which a better appreciation of that diversity can help create a community of greater multicultural understanding. The purpose of this project is express multicultural identities to students who live in more culturally homogenous environments.

I grew up in a very white school with white teachers and a lot of neatly cut suburban lawns. I met my first gay person senior year of high school. Before that, I never noticed that anyone could possibly be outside of the hegemonic norm. I also met my first Arab and Indian friends while taking college-level courses during my senior year of high school. When I started school at Syracuse University, I roomed with a student from South Korea.

That was my first time I’d ever gotten to know someone from another race. It wasn’t until college that I started talking with black students from South American and African backgrounds. For the first 19 years of my life, students of color just didn’t exist. I can take a leap and bet that there are other students like me, who have never started or been able to have a conversation with someone from a certain race. How could I make a project that would help me understand people from all different kinds of minorities? How could I open a window into the lives of people from all different backgrounds?

These stories have to be retold. When students understand what life is like for someone in China, they will have a greater capacity to empathize and befriend a person from that ethnic background. The more I go past my comfort zone and continue befriending and learning about students of color, the better I will be as a person. As I’m writing this, I am still unsure if I’m using the word “Black”
correctly. I’ve just gone and changed “black” to “students of color” in several instances, as if I am somehow offending someone with its improper use. I hope that feeling will go away as I befriend more students who are Black and begin sharing in their stories.

I was intimidated to interview two students, one from Ghana and one from Jamaica. I haven’t been able to edit their interviews yet, but I will add their perspectives to the project later this summer. Both students were friendly, welcoming, and like me in many ways. I talked with them, as I talked with every student for this project, about their high school experiences. The great thing about using high school as a topic of discussion is that it is a fairly universal thing in every developed country, and it immediately creates a sense of connection.

We as content creators and academics have an obligation to address Cultural misunderstandings. The point of this project is to create an experience as close as possible to meeting another student and sharing with them memories of growing up. I believe this is a powerful way to share stories, and by sharing stories we make the world a better place.

I focused on Asian experiences and American experiences because that is territory I have the most access to. I am taking a class in Asian Fiction and studying Japanese. In classes about Asian identity, I don’t feel that I will offend my classmates with a misplaced word or racial assumption. My next step will be to interview a more diverse group of students: from Brazil, Ethiopia, Egypt, Russia, Japan, Australia, Vietnam, and Croatia. I want to catalog student experiences in an engaging way, so that someone sitting down in an all-white high
school can learn about students that don’t look or act like him. He’ll quickly notice that, no matter where a student is from, or the color of his skin, that he shares with him in the experience of high school education. The same themes continue to come up again and again: relationships, food, tests, dating, culture, tradition, and playing games. Life growing up at school crosses cultures and unites us in the common experience of growing up. What a powerful message. It’s one I want to keep reminding myself of, and one that I hope to continue retelling in some form for the rest of my life.

In this way, this project is only a foundation for a much larger life project. I’m planning to continue cataloguing student’s experiences and sharing them with others. The more we share the stories of real people from around the world, the more willing people will be to connect with the world.

I have a family, and I grew up in a culture that was mostly accepting of other cultures. I mean, I heard people in my family say nigger, gay, gook, and faggot when I was growing up, but even as I heard the words, I could see that the speaker had no idea what they were doing. They had no animosity in their language. They just got the primal thrill from innocuously demeaning another culture while in the safety of an all-white environment.

Would that still happen if when they were growing up they had a best friend who was black, Arab, gay, Hispanic, or Asian? I’m betting my life that things would be different. So, if this is indeed the case, how can I “be the change I wish to see?” My feeble attempt at that change is with a web browser and a video camera.
The reason to focus on Asian Americans in the beginning of this project also stemmed from my journey over the last two years to understand Asian culture and identity. I started taking Japanese and began reading literature from Asian writers. Growing up in white suburbia means that my education has focused on white history. I took American history and European history. I only knew Asia through European intrusions like the Opium War. I had a fleeting recognition of the man standing in front of a tank at Tienanmen Square. I knew Japan through Anime but was ignorant of everything else. Other countries, like Vietnam and Korea, were complete unknowns to me because I had never met students who had grown up there.

Luckily, at Syracuse I had the chance to understand Chinese culture to an extent I never had before. This is partly thanks to the high number of students who come from China for graduate work. I spent hours talking with dozens of students from Mainland China, and that informed my perspective and my understanding of their childhood homes. I wouldn’t be able to share in that identity if I had gone to some other university, with a weaker graduate program.

Many people, because of location, aren’t able to talk with someone of another race in the way I was able to, by befriending students from a Chinese cultural background. A website is a feeble attempt at introducing real connections, but it is in its own humble way a necessary start.

My fascination with those Chinese students’ experiences created the site you see now. Their stories motivated me to search for an understanding of my racial perceptions and of identity. That search is just beginning, but I will
continue to push myself to understand, not only cultural identity in Asia, but also cultural identity throughout the world.

Video and technology are my canvas because they are the most powerful remote forms of expression I know of when the goal is getting my message across. When I was younger, I lived by the internal motto: “Make your voice heard.” That in no small part led me to pursue acting and singing. I thought, “If I train my voice, people will notice me, and I can make a difference.” If you’ve met me before, you’ll notice that I have kind of a unique voice, considering I’m a skinny white guy. A big part of my decision to come to Syracuse was because I noticed that my voice might be my way of standing out in the job market.

Syracuse University had the best communications program I’d heard of, so it made sense to go there. When I shifted to Television, Radio, Film as a major I noticed the ways that stories shape us as viewers and how powerful way they can change perceptions. It was only natural that I began redefining my goal from “if I train my voice, people will notice me” to “if I tell my story, people will notice me.” But what story to tell? I am still searching, but this project has resonated with me to an extent that I haven’t felt in a long time. It’s allowing me to further open my eyes to the broader human experience, instead of remaining in my isolated childhood community and an increasingly isolated American media landscape. The age of the Internet, in fact, makes it even easier for students to remain isolated within their social networks and select media sources.

I finally understand why people fight for equal representation of minorities on television and in film. It matters. I developed my earliest sense of identity
through the television screen and through the novels that I read. All of them, for the most part, contained predominantly white characters. Even now, I assume that characters in a book are white unless specifically and repeatedly told otherwise. When every book you read that’s not about the South has a white protagonist, it’s easy to assume that somehow being white is a pseudo-requirement to being a hero in Western literature. I wonder if Chinese students automatically think of the characters in their books as Chinese. Media is one of the most powerful tools in the world. It’s the way we propagate stories, and stories are the ways in which we make sense of the world. The more people are exposed to stories outside of their race, the better off we are.

And I’m not just saying that halfheartedly. People like to bring up the decline of “white power” as minorities continue to become more and more influential as a percentage of the American and world population. I don’t want my grandchildren to be discriminated against for being White in the same way I naturally felt apprehension toward Blacks. I’m terrified that people will act instinctively and judge me based on race instead of on identity, of only sexuality instead of on character. How do we as a society begin to change that?

I have no better answer than this: one story at a time. The more we understand and connect with one another, the less ethnicity acts as a barrier to connection. I am, of course, speaking from a white perspective, but this is of course true of all countries. Most Chinese have all Chinese friends. Black people more easily befriend other black people. It’s a human thing. We feel safe around
the people who look like us, sound like us, and think like us. Is it possible to break away from that? What would it take?

So this project is also very much a self-experiment. Can I find a way to get rid of these irrational perceptions about race that I have developed? Then, is there a way to make that solution viral? This project is not the answer, but it’s a start.

The style of the site comes from an aesthetic I’ve been drawn to for years. I was really into mind maps as a form of visualization during freshman year at college, and I even developed an early website that used a mind map as a user interface instead of a traditional site architecture. In the case of this project, I learned when developing the ibook that one of the best ways to incorporate multiple profiles was to let the user decide: Choose the profile that looks most interesting to you and go on a little journey. I don’t want anyone to watch all of the profiles on the site. I want them to watch at least one. It’s like a choose-your-own-adventure novel. There’s an element of choice and interactivity, even though there are only words, pictures, and videos on each page. This ties into the earlier comment my advisor gave me when I initially thought about using interview transcripts: If it’s not engaging, people won’t even read it. You have to draw people into the experience. Interactivity in the form of choice on the website will hopefully contribute to that result.

Tim Ferriss has been a huge inspiration to me over the past several years. He has become a bestselling author by experimenting with lifestyle design and learning methods and publishing his findings. One of the interesting things about
his last book, called *The 4-Hour Body* was his candid acknowledgement that it should not be read in its entirety. Each person has specific goals and interests. Why should a book or site be formatted only to provide one experience? In Ferris’s case, his book was formatted like a dictionary of personal fitness. It covered muscle gain for bodybuilders, as well as weight loss for women. In that sense, I hope my site can one day become a cultural dictionary of experience, where people can search through and explore the perspectives of people from different backgrounds. Not everyone will benefit from every video and link, but everyone can benefit from one of the experiences the site has to offer. In curating the site, I try to be specific regarding what I feel best contributes most to the site’s existing body of knowledge.

I am also breaking down profiles by country and providing the site with a brief synopsis of each country and a summary of the most common student experiences in that country. Basic things, such as the way Chinese schools, on average, structure their days. Chinese have morning exercises, while Iranians have morning prayers. Some things are very common within the country and help us understand the educational experience there. This will help students better understand the interviews provided. The point of it all is to create a spark of curiosity. Here’s the ideal chain reaction: If you want to know more about one student from another country that might lead you pick up a book about that country, it could, in turn, lead you to want to visit that country. This mindset automatically requires you to see the world from a larger perspective.
That’s a major reason why I’ve applied to teach in Zhengzhou this fall. I want to see what it’s like to be a minority. I’ve only rarely experienced an environment where most of the people around me look different, sound different, and think differently than I do. China, as I see it, is about as far as you can go from Western culture, while staying in the industrialized world. Immersing myself in that unique culture will aid me in my quest to better understand myself, as well as the multiplicity of faces I see when I envision the larger world.

I find it upsetting that many Americans have never left the country, most don’t speak a second language, and some have never even ventured outside of their hometown. In China, only about 2% of citizens have a passport. In the USA, that figure is around 30%. A globalized world requires people to have a global curiosity. We must do everything that we can to instill in young people a proclivity to embrace diversity and accept difference. The cost of world travel is still extremely prohibitive for most of the world, so it is important for people, especially media specialists, to find ways to create global understanding virtually.

Hollywood is a prime example of the ways in which America spreads its identity throughout the world. If you ask most foreign students about the United States, they’ll mention Seinfeld or Friends. A lot of sitcoms are used in the classroom to help teach English. The most powerful representation of American ideals in the worldwide market happens to be the American film and television industry. This should come as no surprise. Hollywood is the most successful hub of the entertainment business in the world. There’s a reason most people around the world know who Tom Hanks is but not Hu Jintao. The question is: How can
we create a media property that will make it so that someone in the United States is curious about China (or India or Africa). Invisible Children’s recent KONY campaign was an interesting attempt at awareness, but that quickly faded. I don’t know if there is a final answer to this problem, but luckily I don’t specialize in answers. I specialize in attempts. I think my project reflects that. In the end, it is the result of a series of wrong directions. Even this final version is only a stepping-stone to a more inclusive rendition to come about in the future.

Tim Ferris also inspired me by saying that he was his own “human guinea pig.” In his case, that meant experimenting with work practices and physical fitness. He ran off to Africa to get tests done on his muscle tissue and to implant a blood sugar tracker into the side of his chest. Instead of experimenting with my body, I intend to experiment with cultural experience and integration. I hope one day I can find that answer of racial acceptance for myself and share my experiences with people from all around the world.

*Guinea pig* is the appropriate term for this because sometimes the most important revelations are painful. It is much easier to suppress feelings of racism or sexism than to hold yourself accountable and attempt to gain a better understanding of difference. I still remember what it felt like the first time I went to the Black Campus Ministry here at Syracuse. I was the only white kid in the audience, as the reverend told us about Christ and we began singing gospel hymns. Even in such a welcoming environment, I felt naturally nervous. My goal is to understand that feeling and find a way to lift, or at least transform, the racial assumptions I have picked up so far in my life. Difference is always
intimidating because difference sometimes isn’t safe. The choice I have to make now is whether this form of exploration into multiculturalism is worth the risk.

Some projects transcend letter grades and academic deadlines. Some projects have the potential to last a lifetime. Only the future will tell. For now this stepping-stone has led me to an increased awareness of myself and of the larger multicultural world in which I live. The next step is to continue to learn and share.
Summary of Capstone Project

My Capstone project is a web series. It consists of a group of short videos that document the lives of several students from China and the United States. On the homepage I greet you and I quickly take you through my high school experience before inviting you to meet some of my friends.

When you click on the next link a group of links appear to a number of different episodes. Each episode is a student. Three of the students are from China and one student is from the United States. When you click on their profiles you go to their episodes page where you have a selection of a number of sections to choose from. Each section details an aspect of that student’s high school experience. At the end of most videos I pose a question to the viewer and welcome them to share their own experiences with me and later with the site.

The first profile is Phoenix Wang (Wang Si). She is a graduate student at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, which is part of Syracuse University. She grew up in Dalian, China. She tells us about her school’s schedule and the dreaded final exam called the GaoKao that students in China spend their last year of high school specifically preparing for.

In the second section Phoenix tells us about how relationships are “banned” in China. Parents and teachers discourage relationships because they distract students from preparing for the GaoKao exam. Phoenix then goes on to tell us about her dream of being an Entrepreneur as a child and the rich entrepreneurial heritage she has. Her grandparents started a factory in China and
her Aunt is a fashion designer. In the final section Phoenix reflects on the ways the Cultural Revolution in China effected her parent’s education.

The second profile is Yiwei. Yiwei grew up in Hubei province in China. She tells us about her experience dating a boy at the end of senior year in high school. She then tells us about the eye exercises that students are required to do at school because of the large numbers of students who suffer from nearsightedness. In the third section she reflects on the different groups at her school and the ways in which nerds are actually looked up to. There are no jocks and cheerleaders like in the United States. Finally, she tells us about the People’s Party in China and the way the Chinese see it. Being part of the party is a form of pride for the Chinese people.

The third profile is Hugh. Hugh begins by telling us about his band in high school and his tastes in music. He then tells us about his love of online gaming and his need to sneak out at night to play. In the last section he tells the story of the day he told his teacher to fuck off and reflects on the different forms of punishment at his school.

The final student, Jeff, comes from Long Island and begins by reflecting on the importance of football in the American student experience. He then tells us about the different groups at his high school, including druggies, jocks, and nerds. To conclude he tells us about his favorite teachers and what made them unique.

The videos are structured as interviews with graphics added and intercut segments of myself as a host. I ask Phoenix, Hugh, Yiwei, and Jeff questions.
about their high school experiences and end most segments with a reflection. I then urge the viewer to share their own stories with me as a part of the site.

Every page contains an episode list as well as a short description of each student. Below the episode list is a “message me” link that forwards the student to a form from which they can share with me their own stories about high school. A shared stories section will, in time, become its own part of the site.

The concept of the porect arose from the author’s own experiences detailing with racial insecurities. This project is a direct result of his tensions with those issues and an attempt to forward the ideal of cultural integration through shared experiences. The site attempts to share stories of students from different cultural backgounds while relying on the author as a narrator in which to view those other voices.

The entire site is available at TheEngageProject.com and the format of the site was made spefically so that more profiles could be added in the future. The site is a working model for a potential larger work or television series.