Learning Goals

Grades: 9–12
Technology: *use appropriate technologies to organize, integrate, and apply information in problem-solving and communicating.*

by **Donna Learmont**

Collaborating for Success

How video teachers and classroom teachers can work together to achieve powerful learning through student video production.

Video production is a richly layered activity that engages learning and skills on many levels. It is a form of experiential learning with attention-grabbing moments, drama, and heightened emotions that create the distinct memories that are essential for long-lasting learning. It's an inherently multidisciplinary activity. Scripting and plot development involves language-arts skills; lighting and white-balancing cameras prior to shooting involves knowledge of color temperature theory; credit sequences draw on graphic-design skills; and sound editing requires knowledge of music. In addition, students learn a communication process that requires planning, time management, teamwork, and of course, technology.

As the video teacher at the high schools in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., I have collaborated with and coached teachers in every academic discipline through video projects. Teachers are generally enthusiastic about the video medium, but at first they are not always aware of what's involved in student video production. That's where I come in. In production classes, students learn both technical-production and media-literacy skills. I have also provided teachers with informal workshops that supplement, reinforce, or refresh their professional development to help them successfully integrate digital video into their curriculum.

In my experience, classroom teachers generally initiate collaborative projects. It's usually a conversation that starts with, "Hey would it be possible to..." This leads to a conversation in which we determine the teacher's learning objective and whether or not it makes sense to address it with technology. Technology-based projects are often selected because of mandates to include technology, rather than reasons that are related directly to effective teaching and learning. But technology should be incorporated only

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where it makes sense. The teachers who have the most success with video understand that learning about technology is not the primary goal. Writing, discussion, and analysis—the old classroom standbys—are still paramount.

Projects that I've worked on with teachers span all the curriculum areas.

- English students tape performances of their original poetry in a class room that is set up like a coffeehouse, complete with checkered tablecloths, clickers, and candles.
- Another English class tapes new endings for novels and re-creates famous movie scenes for a film criticism course.
- A calculus teacher uses computer animation to demonstrate how two-dimensional objects can appear three-dimensional when rotated.
- A business-law class tapes mock trials and reviews them for legal techniques and courtroom demeanor.
- A physical-education teacher tapes aerobics routines for other students to emulate while exercising, and captures athletic performances in order to study form and technique.
- Many foreign-language programs have been produced, either to teach language in conversational context or to offer students a chance to subtitle dialogue. It's also an easy way to check pronunciation.
- Numerous hearing-impaired programs have been produced demonstrating American Sign Language for signing children's songs, counting lessons, teaching sign language, and exploring deaf culture. A word of warning: any project involving signing or subtitling will be fairly difficult and very time-consuming.
- Since video is comprised of changing images, screen space can be treated as a moving canvas that is perfect for artistic expression. Light, color, texture, and composition are all components of a video production, and projects can be devised that let students express artistic concepts that are in motion. Visual essays, music videos, and installation pieces for exhibits are ways in which video is used in art. These can be highly technical and time-consuming student projects.

The Collaborative Process

If video is a good fit with a teacher's learning objectives, our dialogue moves ahead. Some key questions and answers are:

What equipment is available? Who is trained to use it?

While video equipment has been available in many school districts since the 1980s, it has been primarily the realm of video production teachers, media specialists, or audio-visual support personnel. Now desktop computers and digital camcorders affordably offer video-production and editing capabilities right in the classroom.

Teachers who most successfully use digital video with their students have had some training with cameras and editing. Once a project is up and running, it's not wise to rely exclusively on students to help you with technical problems. I am generally available to answer questions, troubleshoot glitches, or offer advice on importing, exporting, or editing footage. Teachers often underestimate the complexity of video and overestimate the ability of technology-savvy students to help carry the class along. Also, it is difficult, if not

continued on page 19

impossible to grade a project if the process of creating it isn't understood.

It's important to understand the capacity of the computer on which the digital video will be edited, too. One educator I know put her heart and soul into an hour-long video that never saw the light of day because it crashed her computer due to memory overload. Also, if several student projects reside on a shared computer, memory can disappear quickly. It is important to have realistic expectations when assigning videos to students. Short pieces from 30 seconds to 10 minutes are probably a good limit, depending upon the age range of the student and the level of expertise.

There are probably old analog camcorders around the school. While video may be shot with these, it will still need to be converted to a digital format in order to capture it with a computer. I have known plenty of teachers and students who have hit this snag. I recognize the panic on their faces when they show up at my door, VHS tape in hand, and want to know how to get the footage into a computer. The short answer is you can't. It has to be digital. This will require dubbing it to a digital camcorder or digital videotape recorder first or running it through a converter.

What is the timeline?

Teachers are often surprised by how time-consuming production can be. I like to review the planning process with the classroom teacher, presenting concepts such as a treatment statement, three-column script, and storyboarding. I also might coach the teacher along with the students in a short session (20–30 minutes) on shooting, audio, and lighting tips to improve the overall quality of the footage and to make sure everyone has realistic expectations about the shooting schedule. A review of guidelines for copyright, release forms, and safety rules for young producers who want to make action sequences is also helpful.

How will the project be evaluated?

Grading is best accomplished by using rubrics given to students in advance. The categories in the rubric can include the evidence of planning; the content itself; the accuracy or creativity of the information; the technical qualities of camerawork, lighting, audio, graphics and editing; and finally, the overall effectiveness or aesthetics of the production. It is wise to have the students prepare a treatment statement that states the objective, the target audience, a brief description of the production, and projected deadlines in advance of the production. The final grade should take into consideration how well the student delivered what was promised.

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Length is not always the best indicator of effort. A five-minute video may take literally weeks to accomplish if it is a complicated production, while a half-hour interview might take only 30 minutes. For most subject areas, content will be graded more heavily than aesthetics, but this may vary. An art piece might be graded almost exclusively on aesthetics.

The Role of Media Literacy

In my classes, media-literacy analysis and deconstruction of professionally produced media precedes any video-production assignments. By studying media content and construction, students acquire critical thinking skills that help them to view programs selectively; understand how media affects society, behavior, and health; identify sources of bias; distinguish between fact and fiction. Media literacy also helps students develop a sense of media ethics and an awareness of citizens' rights and responsibilities. Teaching analysis and production together is a logical approach, similar to teaching reading with writing.

Media literacy is a discipline in and of itself, but it is also important for teachers of all subjects. I know a science teacher who showed a documentary that seems to present a solid argument that a man never walked on the Moon. Using her media-literacy training, she walked her students through an analysis that showed how the producers skewed the information.

Media literacy can help students determine the legitimacy of sources and minimize their susceptibility to manipulation. As commercial products that combine corporate public relations efforts with academic materials become more prevalent in classrooms, considering the credibility or motivations of authors becomes a critical skill for students and teachers. For all these reasons, the Bloomfield Hills School District provides media-literacy training for most secondary teachers.

Extending the Learning

Over the years, teachers in Bloomfield Hills Schools have used video in a variety of creative ways to achieve their benchmarks *and* to teach skills that reach far beyond the typical school experience.

- Because teaching is a great way to learn and since my classes mix repeating with beginning students, I call on the more experienced students to mentor others.
- Students also enter their video productions into competitions in order to get feedback from outside the classroom. This lends credibility and validity to their skills and builds their confidence. Students feel their ability to make a difference, and can measure their strengths against their future competitors from other schools. This is highly motivating for most students.
- To develop teamwork, my students work together in the school studio to produce an instructional cooking show.
- Producing public service announcements helps students develop their persuasive techniques and identify audiences.
- Video news production also allows students to bring in footage and experiences that extend well beyond the classroom walls.

Students will usually greet video assignments with enthusiasm. However, it can quickly turn into frustration for both the teacher and students if expectations are unreasonably high or technical difficulties develop along the way. With ample preparation, video productions can become an exciting way to get students involved with classroom content. ◂

For a copy of this story with additional equipment recommendations, go to http://www.ciconline.org/Enrichment/Teaching/learningwithtechnology/default.htm.