

New Media Literacies, Student Generated Content, and the YouTube Aesthetic

Abstract: The proliferation of content generation and sharing through Web 2.0 tools has created what Henry Jenkins refers to as new media literacies. We explore the application of new media literacies through digital media creation with eighth graders. This pilot project promotes online video capabilities in conjunction with the time-honored practice of adolescents reading classic and young adult literature. Through the project's curriculum design and pedagogical apparatus, student-generated digital stories illustrate that complex thinking and learning and the YouTube aesthetic do not need to be mutually exclusive. We provide the theoretical foundations for our work as well as preliminary analysis of student-generated products. We will introduce a revised scaffolding process that incorporates a series of rubrics (based on Henry Jenkins framework on *new media literacies* and Biggs and Collis *SOLO taxonomy*) to facilitate evidence of complex thinking in the students' next round of video products.

Background and Goals of the Project

The aim of this project, which we have termed CINÉMA VERITÉEN, is to contribute to the digital media learning landscape through three accomplishments: 1) Encourage youth identity exploration, cultural understandings and complex thinking for students in grades 6-10 through literature and digital storytelling; 2) Advance student-generated digital storytelling capabilities with Web 2.0 tools for 21st century learning; and 3) Catalyze social networking among students and teachers through video and dialogue exchange in an online "safe harbor" environment. CINÉMA VERITÉEN, blending the power of literature and digital media, is grounded in the concept of cinema vérité (i.e., "cinema truth") and refers to the 1950's film-making movement that emphasized the value of films shot in the real world rather than in conditions and settings controlled by the filmmaker. Although born in a different historical and social context, cinema vérité, with its down-to-earth, low budget, do-it-yourself approach, is arguably a precursor to the contemporary YouTube video aesthetic. Through the project's curriculum design and pedagogical apparatus, student-generated digital stories will illustrate that complex thinking and learning and the YouTube aesthetic are not mutually exclusive. Rather, this unique amalgamation has the potential to catalyze student engagement in relevant and rigorous content. CINÉMA VERITÉEN activities occur in an online "safe harbor" environment that insures students will not be exposed to undesirable content and provides an optimal space to explore and innovate new media literacies.

Forty years ago, developmental psychologist Erik Erikson (1968) asserted that "the development of a sense of identity is the key developmental task or 'crisis' of adolescence." Despite vast changes in society, many of which have been driven by advanced technologies, Erikson's claim about adolescence still stands. Using Erikson's position as a theoretical touchstone, the purpose of CINÉMA VERITÉEN is to provide an online resource that marries the time-honored practice of reading young adult literature with digital media learning as students explore identity development. Targeting literature from a range of cultural viewpoints enriches the reading experience by providing both a mirror and window into the lives of characters and equipping readers with an essential tool in their own journey of self-discovery. Student viewing, creating, and sharing digital content is prompting new literacies and new modes of knowledge production that are not yet fully understood by educators (see The New London Group, 2000; Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear & Leu, in press; Jenkins, 2006; Kramer-Dahl, 2005). While technology heads ever forward to the next frontier, schools change at a slower pace. CINÉMA VERITÉEN has the potential to catalyze education by forging new models of how Web 2.0 tools and digital media and learning can be seamlessly integrated into classroom practice.

A Nimble Web Environment that Promotes Social Networking

As part of the CINÉMA VERITÉEN project, we have developed and are hosting a suite of enabling content creation and sharing tools organic to the Web that reside in a "safe harbor." Safe harbor implies that the site will be monitored and allow no external links from embedded videos. Specifically, we are using a Clip-Share YouTube clone that allows a single administrator to approve content. In this Linux web environment, users share educational video

content by pushing and pulling video file formats in conjunction with robust portability. An additional plug-in will enable users to record video content to the site in real time.

A Pedagogical Apparatus that Promotes Narrative as a Tool for Complex Thinking

CINÉMA VERITÉEN's pedagogical apparatus includes rubrics and student-generated digital story models that provide scaffolding for new content creators. The goal is to guide the creation of high quality video products in conjunction with targeted literature titles while fostering student and teacher creativity. To that end, a series of rubrics have been designed and are being pilot-tested in middle grade classrooms. The aim of the rubrics is to provide scaffolding for complex thinking during student video design process and is based on current thinking on *new media literacies* and the *SOLO taxonomy*. The new media literacies framework is based on the work of Jenkins (2006) and his MIT colleagues. Prompted by the rich media landscape that exists today, Jenkins has articulated a new skill set that involves social skills developed through collaboration and social networking. These skills build on the foundation of traditional literacy, research skills, technical skills, and critical analysis skills taught in the classroom. The SOLO taxonomy (Biggs and Collis 1982) describes the five levels of increasing complexity in student understanding. This taxonomy is helpful in providing scaffolding for Levy and Murnane's (2004) targeted skills of expert thinking and problem and complex communication, which many believe are the two most important skills for 21st century work and life. They define expert problem solving as involving effective pattern matching based on detailed knowledge; the set of skills used by the stumped expert to decide when to give up on one strategy and what to try next. They assert that complex communication requires the exchange of vast amounts of verbal and nonverbal information, with the information flow being constantly adjusted as the communication evolves unpredictably.

CINÉMA VERITÉEN PROJECT GOALS AND STRATEGIES



Pilot Project for the CINÉMA VERITÉEN Process

As part of a pilot project and to explore practical applications for CINÉMA VERITÉEN we partnered with an 8th grade English/language arts teacher from Centennial Campus Middle School (CCMS). CCMS is a Wake County Magnet Middle school located on NC State University's Centennial Campus and physically adjoined to the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation (fridayinstitute.org). Planning for CCM emerged more than 10 years ago as a collaborative effort between Wake County and NCSU's College of Education to serve as a model school for the state. CCMS serves both a base population and a self-selected choice population of students. As a magnet, the student population draws from widely dispersed areas across Wake County.

The teacher explained to the students that they would be participating in the CINÉMA VERITÉEN project along with researchers from the Friday Institute. For Phase 1 of the pilot project students were directed to create digital book trailers in the form of 1-2 minute video clips. We defined book trailers as persuasive media that depict the essence of the book through visual images and spoken narration. The intended audience for their book trailer was their peers and the goal was to persuade their peers to want to read the book. Persuasion techniques were based on the North Carolina Standard Course of Study for 8th grade English/language arts. In preparation for creating their book trailer, students read a combination of books including classic titles for in class assignments (e.g., *Huckleberry Finn*, *Tom Sawyer*) and self-selected popular titles for out of school pleasure reading (e.g., *Eragon*, *Perfect*, and *Peak*). We drew from Louise Rosenblatt's reader response theory and prompted students to make connections with their text on at least one of three levels: text to self, text to text, and text to world. The book trailer production process involved six steps: 1) Brainstorm book connections with peers; 2) Create mental images to illustrate a story; 3) Incorporate a persuasion technique (e.g., drop a big name, bandwagon, glittering generality, etc.); 4) create a Storyboard using words and images; 5) film the book trailer; 6) review and edit; and 7) publish and share content on Clip-Share YouTube clone; By beginning with a short, well-defined process and product, students were able to connect with the book content and simultaneously begin acquiring foundational digital media process skills without being overwhelmed.

Content analysis of the book trailers revealed several challenges associated with student generated digital media products, including lack of depth of understanding of the literary work, minimal oral presentation skills, and lack of attention to visual aesthetics. In essence, it appeared that the students were not equipped to take the perspective of their peers who would be their future viewers. As we expected, students' products revealed aspects of what we have termed as the YouTube aesthetic, namely the down-to-earth, low budget, do-it-yourself approach to video production. In Phase 2 of the pilot project, we used a project based approach in which students targeted a compelling question (e.g. What is world hunger and will it ever end?). In addition to reading a literary work related to their topic, students conducted web-based research to create their information synthesis. We introduced a revised scaffolding process that incorporated a co-constructed rubric (presented below) to facilitate evidence of complex thinking in the students' next round of video products. Furthermore, we added video editing to the process, for which students used Microsoft Movie Maker. Based on the Phase 2 pilot results, we anticipate that we may need to conduct several more rounds of this iterative design process in order to establish a library of video exemplars that will serve as benchmarks for advancing the goals of the project.

Assessment Rubric for Student-Generated Video

The video assessment rubric elements were co-constructed by the students and teachers, and the level descriptions were adapted from Rubistar (<http://rubistar.4teachers.org>). The rubric was used to evaluate the intellectual, aesthetic, and technical quality of the videos by the students themselves, by peers, by teachers, and by a critical friend with expertise in the video's subject matter.

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Intellectual Quality				
Clear Purpose	Establishes a purpose early on and maintains a clear focus throughout.	Establishes a purpose early on and maintains focus for most of the presentation.	There are a few lapses in focus, but the purpose is fairly clear.	It is difficult to figure out the purpose of the presentation.
Synthesis and Construction of Ideas	Sequential composition; succinct; images create an atmosphere and/or tone, and may communicate symbolism and/or metaphors.	Sequential composition; succinct; images create an atmosphere and/or tone.	Sequential composition; succinct; images are controlled/logical	Sequential composition; images are acceptable.
Curriculum Connections	Clear and compelling connections to issues of local activism (social studies) and appropriate language use for a general audience (language arts).	Clear connections to issues of local activism (social studies) and appropriate language use for a general audience (language arts).	Clear connections to issues of local activism (social studies) or appropriate language use for a general audience (language arts).	No clear connections to issues of local activism (social studies) and inappropriate language use for a general audience (language arts).
Clear Beginning and Ending	Clear and interesting start and end.	Clear start and end.	Clear start or end.	No clear start or end.
Sources Cited Appropriately	Source information collected for all graphics, facts and quotes. All documented in MLA format.	Source information collected for all graphics, facts and quotes. Most documented in MLA format.	Source information collected for graphics, facts and quotes, but not documented in MLA format.	Very little or no source information was collected.
Aesthetic and Technical Quality				
Image quality	Video and images are compelling and of high quality. Images clearly support content.	Video and images are of high quality. Images clearly support content.	Some video and images are of high quality. Some images support content.	Video and images are not of high quality. Images do not support content.
Editing/Transitions	Engaging rhythm; appropriate transitions, enhanced vitality	Engaging rhythm; some appropriate transitions; evidence of vitality.	Some rhythm; limited transitions; lapses in vitality.	Mechanical rhythm; limited vitality.
Audio (Music and Dialogue)	Consistency in presentation; clearly articulated narration; Music stirs a rich emotional response.	Consistency in presentation; clear narration; Music stirs an emotional response.	Some consistency in presentation; lapses in clarity of narration; Music is evident.	Breaking consistency; monotone style of presentation; Inappropriate choice of music.

Creativity/Originality	Product shows a large amount of original thought. Ideas are creative and inventive	Product shows some original thought. Work shows new ideas and insights.	Uses other people's ideas (giving them credit), but there is little evidence of original thinking.	Uses other people's ideas, but does not give them credit.
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Students hosted their videos in the Cinema Veriteen safe harbor and participated in a publish and share session with invited guests. To accompany their video products, students were required to produce a written reflection that consisted of an evaluation of their web sources, an evaluation of how they chose language to reach their target audience, and a discussion of potential impact of their videos.

The rubric presented above is appropriate and useful for evaluating these project-based video products. Additional rubrics will be designed to assess a range of student video products designed for different learning goals.

References

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