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The Role of Collaboration and Feedback in Advancing Student Learning in Media Literacy and Video Production

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Voices in the Field

Abstract

Teaching advanced video production is an art that requires great sensitivity to the process of providing feedback that helps students to learn and grow. Some students experience difficulty in developing narrative sequences or cause-and-effect strings of motion picture sequences. But when students learn to work collaboratively through the revision process as part of an advanced video production course in high school, they tend to develop higher expectations for the quality of their academic work and apply a more rigorous framework of analysis to the media messages they encounter, including fiction motion pictures (such as feature films or television shows), documentary films or non-fiction series, story-based interactive games, and short-form platforms such as commercials or music videos.

Keywords: *media literacy, video production, revision, collaboration, feedback, learning*

In documents that have established fundamental national objectives of 21st century education – such as NAMLE’s core principles of media literacy education and the Common Core standards – it is regularly expressed that students must develop skills to become proficient communicators through a wide range of media platforms (Moore and Bonilla 2014). Concurrently, contemporary trends have pointed to an ever-increasing need for students to develop skills in collaborative team-based projects. Barkley, Cross, and Major note that collaborative learning should be seen “not as a replacement for other instructional methods... but a useful complement” (2014, 18), while “extensive research has generated so many positive reports about the benefits of intentionally designed group learning” that “educators can feel confident that there is ample evidence supporting group learning as an effective – even essential – instructional approach” (2014, 14).

Throughout my years as a media literacy educator, one of the most consistent observations I have made is that students benefit enormously from a balanced development of skills as evaluators and producers of media. When coursework begins to become solely centered on either production or analysis, I have repeatedly noticed that the development of students’ abilities to develop broad communicative skills inevitably suffers. The abilities necessary to become effective critical thinkers and expressive multimedia communicators tend to flourish when working in tandem through classroom dialogue and collaboration.

As a result, it is essential that students have opportunities to develop their capacity to problem solve and address creative and critical tasks in team situations (Hakkarainen, 2011). This poses a variety of challenges for teachers since the management of collaborative work demands strong oversight by instructors and skill in providing structure and clear feedback for learners. The outcomes of cooperative learning can be particularly difficult to assess, while its parameters can provide for some of the most challenging management situations for teachers (Randall 1999). In this essay, I share two stories involving the production of public service announcements for advanced media literacy and production classes that illustrate the importance of

developing a flexible yet rigorous process when completing cooperative tasks in the classroom. I teach media literacy and production at a suburban Connecticut public high school of approximately 900 students, where I also serve as a department head on the school leadership team. The school has a predominantly white population (approximately 90%) and features an agriscience program that attracts diverse students from surrounding towns. In my approach to teaching, I emphasize a variety of learning outcomes, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1

Learning Outcomes, High School Class: Advanced Media Literacy and Production

Semester-long course

Meets four times weekly, including one 100-minute extended period. Students complete and are assessed on:

- ✓ Written and presentational analyses of media messages
- ✓ Digital video projects that are completed both in collaborative groups and individually
- ✓ Performance in writing, editing, directing, and applicable craft areas

Learning objectives

Students will:

- ✓ Evaluate a variety of media messages (including documentary, fiction, commercials, public service announcements) using fundamental media literacy principles
- ✓ Compare and contrast who makes media messages, for whom and for what purposes
- ✓ Classify and assess ways that moving images communicate stories and ideas
- ✓ Analyze non-fiction media methods and parameters
- ✓ Produce motion pictures employing a range of planning techniques
- ✓ Direct and edit media projects including short documentaries, PSAs, commercials, and fiction shorts using digital editing software (iMovie and Avid Media Composer)
- ✓ Write properly formatted scripts and related written plans
- ✓ Comprehend and administer production roles in more complex media projects

Creating Public Service Announcements

In 2014, our school administration's leadership team offered a challenge to the students of my advanced digital video production class. The administration and other school leaders were working to enhance the effectiveness of transition programs for the incoming freshmen to the school, and the committee proposed for the media studies upperclassmen to create public service announcements that address this topic. From an initial simple proposal by this nearby "client" — "What message would you like to express to our incoming ninth-graders about finding success in high school?" — the media students were given a great deal of latitude in devising their own content for these short announcements.

This appeal dovetailed well with a unit in which the class investigates principles of non-narrative visual communication. Students develop their skills in analyzing methods of non-narrative communication seen in diverse media, including commercials, television programs, documentaries, and fiction shorts (Casinghino 2011). They are compelled to evaluate strategies medi makers use to articulate concepts visually and to assess how images function together to express ideas in various ways (such as sequences that use categorical, associational, or rhetorical structuring of images).

For this project, students were assigned groups, and the members worked cooperatively to devise approaches. While there is some randomness to the grouping, principles of differentiation according to experience, technical interests, and compatibility are also applied as members rotate combinations and

positions throughout the semester. Often I designate groups for projects, and at other times I allow students to choose their collaborators. I feel that allowing for both arrangements is beneficial because it forces students to work with a variety of peers while also giving them outlets for independent choice. These arrangements mirror either work situations when people are inserted into groups or those creative or business opportunities when we can choose our teammates.

On certain projects, I will assign roles so that students develop all of the essential skills for the course; however, for this introductory project, I allowed them to decide on roles each member would fulfill. This was early in the semester, and one of the primary goals of this exercise was to familiarize students with materials and processes of the course. It was completed in a very short time, less than a week of development and pre-production and a week-and-a-half of production and post-production.

Each student was to bring a concept or pitch to the table, and from there group members would choose to develop one idea or synthesize the most compelling proposals, if that appeared feasible and appealing to them. Students had been exploring the communicative methods described above, and they knew they would have to articulate the narrative or non-narrative methods that they were to employ in their project. Once they agreed on the concept and approach they would take, each group member completed a different element of pre-production (script, storyboard, shot list, unit production manager tasks, etc.).

Interestingly, each project that the different groups created employed distinctive communicative methods. One produced a story involving a failing student; another generated a montage sequence to music that grouped images to demonstrate opportunities available to students; and a third used a rhetorical approach directly addressing the students through audio and images. After they completed their fine cuts of the pieces, the groups presented them and received feedback, first from me, and then from two members of the leadership team (a vice-principal and the head of the guidance department).

Finally, the students completed an essential part of the process. They wrote self evaluations in which they detailed the work they had completed and assessed the outcomes of the entire process, including the effectiveness of their actual collaboration and the quality of the final product in relation to the exercise guidelines and objectives. The students found the feedback process beneficial, all of them offering positive assessments in their evaluations. One commented, “their feedback gave us recommendations on how to improve our film and make it exactly how they want it, instead of us just guessing and assuming.” Another student observed, “this allowed me to get a good feel for what it’s like actually working for a client,” which was echoed in numerous responses. Many wrote that this arrangement made it an “important project,” and that “it shows us from another point of view how they react to our work” or “it gave the groups an opinion of someone who isn’t necessarily a ‘filmmaker.’” One student recommended involving administrators even more throughout the process. As a final note, it is vital to point out the importance of context and setup for a collaborative situation: The established trust and comfortable communicative rapport shared between these members of the leadership team and the students were certainly beneficial to the outcome of this project.

As mentioned earlier, one of the thorniest issues for educators when implementing team-based projects is in the arena of assessment (Diaz et al 2010). Consequently, it is vital to apply comprehensible breakdown of tasks; to delineate clear objectives; to solicit input by students; and to use effective, understandable assessment tools, such as rubrics. From the pre-production and production materials students generate, the evidence in the completed project itself, the instructor’s observations, and the project reports handed in by the students, an assessment is completed for each student individually using an appropriate standard; in this case, it is a rubric designed for media production which includes five 4-point categories.

Depending on the evaluations of the movies, certain students could continue to work on each of the pieces as part of ongoing course work, while others may move on to other projects. In this way, students can learn the value of working on a complex project until it reaches a finely polished state while allowing for some flexibility in the distribution of tasks across the range of assignments available to the class. In their

evaluations for this project, some students indicated that they would like to take advantage of further opportunities to finalize these projects for class credit and their own personal satisfaction.

Case Study: Producing a PSA on Safe Driving

To illustrate the importance of planning and course structure for the development of effective collaborative skills and communicative abilities, I will use one individual case from a recent school year as an example. One of my media literacy classes was producing PSAs on the theme of safe driving for teens and the students were placed into groups that I selected. As opposed to the previous example, this was further into the semester, so students had already produced various fiction shorts, including ones from provided scripts, silent movies with music and effects, and originally scripted narrative pieces.

Each member of the class had to write a proposal for the 30-second PSA, which could be in the form of a script or a storyboard with shot list and description of the content. The members had to pitch their ideas to their designated group, and then they had to come to a decision on which PSA would be made. In fact, these clips are so short that it is quite possible for a group to produce two of the proposals, and one group finished their first one quickly and did just that. As was often the case during this year, a number of the students could not produce a viable complete script for the PSA; this was a class that struggled greatly throughout the year with generating narratives and expressing written concepts or ideas, and this assignment was no exception. These results reflect a propensity that I have witnessed over the years for significant percentages of male students to have great difficulty in developing narratives and characters, although this was one of the most extreme cases of the mixture of inability, resistance, or rejection of crafting scripts and written plans for movie production that I have seen in a class.

At our school, which is the only public high school in the town, there has been a notable tendency over the years for video production courses to be composed predominantly of boys, which reflects tendencies in technology education nationwide with females pursuing STEM coursework at rates below 25% at the secondary level, according to the U.S. Department of Education in 2012 (United States 2012). In my courses during the last 15 years, only twice was the percentage of females in a class at 50%, and in the three most recent years the percentage of females has been 0%, 30%, and 35%.

In parallel, there have been trends in my media literacy and production courses that show striking gender differences in creative writing output. Female students tend to regularly complete scripts on deadline (on average nearly 100% of the time), while male students in these courses generally hover at around a 70% success rate for delivering fully completed scripts or proposals. There are countless factors that can influence this, most prominently that with a smaller number of females taking the course year to year, the girls that do enter the class are likely to be quite committed to its objectives and wish to develop their expressive skills through its activities; conversely, a few of the boys who take the course might be searching for an “easy” elective and also have a desire to *make* movies but not necessarily to *write* them. Some of them already make movies that typically consist of snowboarding/ skateboarding/ skiing/ motocross videos edited to music. In self-assessments, some have voiced finding difficulty progressing past a narrative consisting of a series of shots of figures racing forward around a track or down a slope.

To provide one example, for a silent film assignment, a student had a single visual idea: A boy has sneakers on his hands and cannot get them off. While this was already a far more advanced step towards narrative than with many of his classmates, neither he nor anyone in his group appeared able or willing to write anything further: no character or conflict development, no planned narrative, no opening or conclusion. The group proceeded to shoot a series of comic vignettes that show the difficulties of this boy’s life, including his mistreatment from fellow students, and the initial “final cut” of *Shoe Man* consisted of a series of interchangeable vignettes that offered no development or closure.

After screening the movie, I urged the group to try to devise a setup for their narrative and a shot or sequence that would give at least some sense of closure, since this was part of the assignment. After reshoots, they were able to complete a satisfactory short. They added a quick montage that expresses “Shoe Man” reflecting on the day’s events, followed by a brief scene in which he asks someone to pull off the sneakers. The person does, and we see that he has socks on. He blurts out “Oh..” followed by an expletive (later bleeped) and then a cut to black and credits.

While this is a relatively successful case of students finding a solution to a storytelling dilemma, the majority of the males in this class continued to encounter great difficulty in establishing and developing narratives or sequences of communicative messages. In subsequent years, the trend of approximately one-third of the males of media production classes being repeatedly unable or unwilling to develop narratives or cause-and-effect strings of motion picture sequences has been confirmed. Having said this, I must add that a representative percentage of the most advanced writers and moviemakers I have taught over the years have been males.

Learning Through Revision

For the aforementioned PSA of this case study, in some of the groups, the students swiftly came to a decision because there was only one viable proposal on the table. For other groups, there were no concepts that anyone was confident with, so they decided to initiate brainstorming sessions to come up with ideas and then see if they could flesh them out. In the end, this is how almost half of the groups settled on a story or idea for their PSAs.

In a group made up of three boys and two girls, a student had written a detailed script that she felt confident about, and the members decided right away to produce her idea. It centered on a teen driver who agrees to give a ride to a friend (which is illegal for beginning drivers), then answers a call when she begins to drive. It is ended with a third person peeking forward from the back seat to deliver the message of “Are you in?” in relation to good decision-making on the part of teen drivers. The narrative was a single uncomplicated scene in one location, so they rapidly proceeded to production. They shot the scene and edited it within a brief time. From their point of view, they were done. Table 2 displays the original script:

Table 2

Version 1, “Are You In?” Student-Produced Public Service Announcement, Shot list / Script

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wide Shot: Female driver in full shot approaches car in parking lot, puts key in lock. Male walking from opposite direction calls out, “Can I get a ride home?” She answers, “Yeah, sure.” They get in car. • Close two-shot: Girl puts keys in ignition and takes out phone. Boy says, “Thanks for the ride. I wasn’t sure how I’d get home.” On phone, she says, “Hey, what’s up? Yeah, I’ll be there pretty soon,” as she starts car and looks back to move into reverse. Abruptly, a second boy moves forward from being hidden in the back seat and pops his head in between headrests to say, “Are you in?” • Title card over black, “Are you in?” |
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When it was completed, I watched the “completed” movie and talked about it with them. Like many projects I have seen in introductory media literacy courses, the concept of “finished” for some students actually amounts to a rough cut. Occasionally, an entire class will screen their projects on the due date and every

single one will be in rough cut form. That is why for major projects I always have a buffer for extra time so that students can learn what it means to tighten or refine a movie into one that resembles a true final cut.

In this case, the weaknesses of the initial script combined with lack of focus in the directing resulted in a piece that was nearly incomprehensible. It was hard to follow the dialogue, and the poor writing choice of having another character suddenly appear made for even more confusion (while this had also been pointed out at the script stage). We talked about the editing, and, after some evaluation, it was agreed that they did not have the footage to make it much better. What to do? In this case, they were fortunate that they had shot so quickly, because they had the time for a complete reshoot. This allowed us additional time to talk about how they could communicate their idea more effectively. They replicated the initial shots with some improvements on composition, timing, and performance (including a replacement of one actor), and they also added ideas such as a last shot with a character pointing to the viewer saying “Are You In?” punctuated by a snazzy graphic of the message on the screen. They reshot, edited, and completed a far more successful PSA. Table 3 displays the revised script and shot list.

Table 3

Version 2, “Are You In?” Student-Produced Public Service Announcement, Shot list / Script

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Title card with moving lens flare effect: “Teen Safe Driving” • WS: Girl on cellphone, keys in hand, approaches car in parking lot, adlibbing “She was going to go and hang out with...” while boy approaches from other direction. Male calls out, “Can I get a ride home?” She answers, “Yeah, sure.” They get in car. • Two-shot: (Boy in MCU, girl in CS) Girl continues to talk on phone while putting keys in ignition, “Yeah, I gotta drive this kid home – oh, hang on, someone else is calling,” she pauses then says, “Hello?” A second boy moves forward from being hidden in the back seat, holding a phone up as if he was the caller to the girl, and pops his head in between headrests to say clearly and directly to her, “It only takes one second! Are you in?” • Medium shot, outside car looking in window at first boy: “You know what, I’m in,” says first boy, and he opens door and begins to get out of car. • MS, interior car of girl: She says into phone “You know what, I’m in too,” and then she hangs up and puts down phone, preparing to drive without phone or passenger. • Full shot, back of car serving as frame: A third teenage boy opens up the back hatch to the car, points at the viewer and says, “Are you in?” A title card graphic appears over this shot saying “Are you in?” with the moving lens flare effect from opening title. |
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Wide-Reaching Learning Benefits

It should be noted that the examples in these case studies and discussions of learning outcomes feature student work that illustrates the development of media production skills for learners without previously advanced abilities or outstanding moviemaking aptitude. The examples described in this report do not represent exceptional projects; however, they provide illustrations of key strides that general students can make in developing creative problem solving and collaborative skills. For many students, there is only one place to put the camera – right in front of where they are standing – and their framing choices are determined by whatever focal length the camera is set at when turned on (unless they zoom in and out during the shot).

As they work repeatedly with peers and refine the choices they make in communicating messages to audiences, students discover that they might have a few more choices available to them than they previously imagined.

Moreover, I have found that the effect of this type of work on students' critical thinking skills can be pivotal to their development as media literate learners. As a result of the type of collaborative media projects described above, students who struggled to identify or articulate methods of visual communication, various storytelling structures, or thematic elements present in both non-fiction and fiction media messages will develop more aptitude — and more willingness — to apply analyses to works that would have previously been too demanding or unfamiliar. At the very least, it can help to advance classroom dialogue and move a bit further away from the starting gate.

For example, on a media analysis project in which I ask students to create proposals for an Internet or network series that would investigate issues related to adolescent life today (including social networking, consumerism and marketing, and transitions from high school to college or work), they must integrate analyses of related contemporary media messages into their portfolio, and the critiques in which they have consistently taken part help to nourish the quality of their output. They begin by asking questions of “who?” and “for whom?” and “how?” and “why?” because that is what they had to do when they generated solutions on their own productions. As they refine their written and visual portfolios, they use idea generation and revision process skills that they have employed in collaborative work to integrate into their analysis of comparative examples from diverse media sources.

Subsequently, students tend to apply a more rigorous framework of analysis to new media messages they encounter, including fiction motion pictures (such as feature films or television shows), documentary films or non-fiction series, story-based interactive games, and short-form platforms such as commercials or music videos. The dialogues and spoken and written evaluations in which they were compelled to take part can now be applied to the moving images that they encounter on the various screens in their lives, from their phones to computers to televisions to theaters.

There are daunting potential obstacles when teachers face collaborative learning situations, including fairness in assessment, delineation of tasks, complex group dynamics, and power struggles. However, one of the most significant tests for project-based learning in the media literacy classroom is the ability to get to the finish line. Often, students do not know exactly where the finish line will be, and it generally takes organization, determination, and tenacity to develop the skills and strength to be able to see projects completely through to fruition. It is one of the most challenging tasks for an educator to provide the contexts and support to enable students to strengthen their abilities in creative problem solving and cooperative ventures. These skills can be enormously beneficial to them in fostering critical thinking, strong writing proficiency, and the ability to meet the diverse professional and personal challenges they will encounter in their lives.

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