

Camcorders in the Classroom: an experiential approach to the teaching of media literacy

In the face of rising school violence in America, some critics have begun blaming the media's influence on youth as a contributing factor. Even the president of the United States weighed in on the issue, criticizing the virtual violence of video games (Doom, Mortal Kombat) and feature-length movies (*Basketball Diaries*.) Media literacy, which already exists in many school curricula, is likely to receive greater attention in the future as society wrestles with the issue of youth violence.

For some, media literacy has the capacity to awaken in children a new understanding of the "evils" of broadcasting. Others believe it can inoculate them against its rampant consumerism and violence. Still others believe it can prepare children to fight the media's poisonous stereotyping. Among media literacy educators, there is widespread disagreement over which of these aims is the central mission of our "literacy." At a recent national conference, about the only thing these educators could agree on is that the ultimate goal is the development of critical thinking skills (Hobbs, 1998).

If our aim is to stimulate critical thought, then we must reject proselytizing and allow our students to collaborate in the construction of the 'truth' of visual literacy. We must accept that perhaps that our "knowledge" of the constructs of film language is culturally biased (Burch, 1997). We must realize that our students have as much to say about media as we do, and that their viewpoints are equally valid (Freire, 1993). Furthermore, if we accept that media tools are powerful, we must consider that the power lies in the hands of those with access to them. Our focus then shifts from merely knowing about the tools to learning to use them.

In 1998, when my colleagues and I began teaching media literacy in public schools in south central Los Angeles, we began with what we believed was a strong curriculum. After all, it had been jointly developed by academics from the fields of anthropology, film, occupational science, dramatic arts, and professionals from journalism and advertising. It had all the hallmarks of a strong pedagogy: scaffolding of concepts, links between lectures and hands-on creative projects, and consideration of the developmental age of the students.

Initially, our classes were presented as lectures followed by hands-on work. Our first fourteen-week session went smoothly. Our students were from the school's highest academic track. They were strong writers and very motivated. Our second group was quite different. They represented a broader cross-section of the school and included both "good students" and students who were regularly disciplined by their teachers for disruptive behavior.

Early on, the “disruptive” students made their presence known. They would openly complain: “This is boring,” or “Why are we talking about this stuff?” In some cases, they would start arguments with other students who chided them for talking out in class. These students were telling us loudly and clearly that our presentations were incomprehensible.

We rejected the direct teaching model and its strong emphasis on social control, and so were forced to come to terms with our students’ complaints. Whole sections of the curriculum, which were deemed too lecture-based, disappeared. In their place, we substituted more creative hands-on projects. We brought in video camcorders and taught students to create stories, documentaries, commercial advertisements and parodies of television programs.

We had learned well the lesson that the teaching of literacy must be meaningful, purposeful and engaging (Smith, 1994). By concentrating on involving the students, rather than preaching, we witnessed a transformation in the classroom. Students who wrote well continued to develop their talents. But even more astonishing was the work that suddenly blossomed from other students. One African-American girl, who struggled academically in school, created a paper doll of herself as a WNBA basketball star. She then made a commercial advertising her “action figure” and warning her audience to “buy now before they sell out.”

Another African-American boy who had also struggled with writing proved very adept at illustration and created a number of puppets that were borrowed by other students to portray characters in their scripts. The level of collaboration rose dramatically, and suddenly students who had been silent were giving advice on dialogue, camera angles and set designs. Furthermore, once we introduced the cameras into the classroom, we no longer had to motivate students to participate. They wanted to make videos, and worked hard to complete the necessary preparations.

We permitted group work, but encouraged groups to assign a task to each member. Our roles as teachers changed from lecturers to facilitators -- helping them find materials, offering some suggestions, but mostly encouraging the group to problem solve when they came to obstacles. Our jobs became easier, but our level of discomfort rose. We had no way to gauge the level of learning taking place, although the sheer volume of our students’ products suggested it was happening.

Can we honestly say that by learning to use a camera, to create visual narratives, to express thoughts and ideas through video that students develop visual literacy? Is it possible that such learning can be incidental? By looking at the similarities between the development of oral and visual literacy, we can begin to answer these questions.

Children are born into a visual world. From the moment they open their eyes after birth, they are bombarded with images that they must make sense of to survive. Developmental psychologists have noted that even in early infancy, children display an interest in and a preference for particular patterns: a bulls' eye -- probably associated with the nourishment obtained from breastfeeding -- and basic human features -- the faces of one's caretakers. No doubt the ability to respond to these images has a direct impact on one's survival. As children grow, their understanding of visual images also expands. In his observations of young children, Piaget noted the development of depth perception, the acknowledgement of the existence of hidden objects and preferences for faces of familiar humans (caretakers.)

We can conclude that the development of visual literacy is innate and subconscious. Children are not even aware they are learning to read these images. Furthermore, these developments occur naturally, and in a predetermined order. These aspects of visual literacy mirror Stephen Krashen's (1992) Acquisition-Learning and Natural Order hypotheses about language acquisition.

Teachers in my program often remark that our students already "know" what we are teaching. In collaborative discussions, students showed a facility for deciphering both the surface features and the deep structures of visual imagery. They knew that ads were promising more than the product could offer. They had also absorbed a host of stereotypical images from television and film and could casually recite how their own cultures were portrayed. One African-American girl remarked, "They (the media) always show us suffering." Another Latino boy commented, "We are always poor. Or gangbangers." They didn't know the word for stereotype, but they certainly knew the concept.

What we are teaching, then, is not the reading of images. Children have already developed this talent naturally, long before they step into our workshops. What we do is expand their thinking, encourage them to develop a framework for organizing what they see in the media and give them new terminology for describing their knowledge.

The process of learning to produce visual media can be compared to the teaching of reading and writing. As Havelock (1986) noted, technology has produced a "forced marriage" between aural communication that draws on the oral tradition and that found in written texts. As a result, teachers of visual literacy must be equally aware of the contributions of orality and written literacy to the art form.

Film criticism has long noted the similarities between narrative structures found in folk tales from the oral tradition and narratives in film. Visual literacy displays the "chunking" of information common to orality. Visual clichés abound: the lady in red, the villain in black, the hero in a white hat. Images quickly telegraph plot lines, so that early on, we know who to cheer for and whom to revile.

But the act of watching a movie can also be compared to reading a book. Readers bring to books their own prior knowledge of how the world works. Readers negotiate the meaning of a text using that prior knowledge and the writer's intent. Viewers of visual media display a similar pattern of comprehension.

When aid workers in Nepal attempted to use videos to teach rural mothers about oral rehydration (to combat one of the leading causes of infant mortality), they discovered that the women who viewed the footage could make little sense of what was going on. The workers had assumed that when the video showed a medium shot of someone pouring a liquid into a glass, followed by a close-up of a hand stirring the liquid with a spoon followed by a medium shot of someone drinking from the glass, that everyone understood what was happening. They discovered that Western conventions of visual language were not shared by people who had no exposure to television and film. For these rural Nepalese, the videos were a collection of confusing images (Burch, 1997).

It is the formal teaching of these conventions that media literacy often concerns itself. The use of symbols, variations in genres, special effects and other techniques used by the media to make certain points can and should be the focus of media literacy. Instruction then centers on providing students with schemas or frames for organizing their thinking about visuality.

We often show videos, film clips and advertising in our workshops, but not without providing the students with some background information and suggesting that they watch for particular things. By doing so, one creates a meaningful context for critical observation. Once again, the criticism is not abstract: We watch to learn strategies and techniques from professionals so that we can adapt them for our own purposes.

As we learned from our early teaching experiences, trying to introduce abstract concepts of visual theory may fail to motivate and engage students who are unfamiliar with the abstract language of media criticism. Introducing cameras into the classroom allows students to develop their cognitive thinking by beginning from a less cognitively demanding, more concrete point. Indeed, linguists point out that children learning speech are presented just this kind of assistance by adults when learning to talk. The language used by adults with small children is based in the here and now, in what can be directly seen and experienced. When you teach a student how to move a camera lens to create close-ups, medium shots and wide shots, she quickly comprehends the differences between the shots because she can see them with her own eyes.

By beginning from the concrete, we are not leaving behind the more abstract concepts, we are merely making them more comprehensible. This understanding is the necessary ingredient for learning. In fact, using a camera offers what

Krashen describes in his Input Hypotheses as the best formula for learning -- comprehensible input linked directly to a more advanced concept just beyond the student's level of comprehension (Krashen, 1992).

During the taping of a student video about dinosaurs, I suggested to the camera operator that she consider moving the camera lower and closer in to the character. "Oh yeah," she responded, "that way we'll see the details and it will look a lot larger." When another student and I discussed the taping of a student talk show, we debated changing the camera position. "If I move the camera, I'll get a different shot, another point of view," the boy told me. By learning the techniques, the students had absorbed the critical, more abstract knowledge as well.

Collaboration in the workshop allows students with better visual-spatial skills to assist less able peers. In one class, a 10-year-old Latina student, Jenny, told me she did not know how to draw. During a class project involving drawing (to stimulate visualization of story lines) she sat at her desk with her hands folded in her lap, staring at the paper in front of her. She wanted to draw Leonardo Di Caprio, her favorite film star. "I don't know how," she sighed. I teamed her with Jim, a student who shared the girl's scholastic difficulties but who had a natural talent for free-hand illustration. Together, they drew the portrait.

Weeks later, we were working as a class to adapt a Korean folktale to video, using paper puppets, backgrounds and dialogue developed by the students. Jenny decided to work alone on her version of the story. She drew a dragon, the girl hero, her blind father and two sailors. She completed three backgrounds, depicting the dragon's deep-sea palace, the girl's house, and the beach. She was the first one to finish her preparations. The drawings were very well done and showed a sense of individual style.

Jenny's progress is a clear example of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. Through collaboration with a more capable peer, Jenny developed her drawing ability and emerged at a much higher level than I could have predicted. Jenny displayed extreme passiveness at times that I believed was the result of too much direct instruction (Freire, 1993). By teaming her with Jim, who was also fairly quiet, I created a new relationship that benefited both students. Jenny was able to see that the task at hand was not beyond her (since it could be done by a peer) and Jim was able to demonstrate his mastery in a new forum.

Jenny's passiveness is shared to greater and lesser extents by a number of my students. They attend schools that are primarily run on direct instruction models. Teachers have the knowledge and students are the vessels into which knowledge is poured. The students are often hesitant about expressing themselves and their own ideas. Formal schooling has built for them an internal wall that separates them from their creativity. In order to develop their visual expression, I must help the students break through this wall.

Our program makes use of Augusto Boal's theater games -- games designed to remind us that anyone can "act" both in the sense of performance, and in the political sense. Our media literacy approach shares Boal's political goal. The end result is to empower students to take action by creating their own media. The games allow us to reawaken this spirit in students. Through improvisation, students become playful and uninhibited, two necessary conditions for learning (Vygotsky; Krashen, 1992).

Everything that is taped in the workshop is shown back to the class as soon as possible. Mistakes are accepted as part of the process (Krashen, 1984). The feedback allows the students to learn from one another and to develop better ideas about filming. Many of my students will build on the work of another classmate, trying a different solution to the same problem. Feedback allows the students to test their theories about filmmaking and improve their techniques (Smith, 1994). They quickly learn from the audience's reactions what works and what does not.

I believe that by developing students' creative expression through media, we offer our students membership in a powerful club. Those that create media are defining our culture, its attitudes, and what is acceptable behavior (Rothman, 1997). Giving them the tools to create their own media, we are giving them membership in this club (Smith, 1994).

Recent developments in technology mean that access to the tools of media is now available to anyone who can afford a home video camcorder. There has been an explosion of video "folk art" in Western culture as the cost of this technology has dropped. People film not only social rituals (weddings, birthday parties, holiday gatherings) but also the smaller events of daily life. Many of these home videos are finding a wider audience in mainstream broadcasting. Ethnographers see in videocameras the opportunity for cultures to define themselves and their own concerns. Marginalized people can use visual media to communicate these concerns, as the Kayapo did in the 1970's, using home videos to publicize how development in the Amazon rainforest threatened their way of life. There are even instances in which home videos have been used in mainstream media to define events missed by professional videographers (Burch, 1997):

Critics agree that footage shot by novices and aired on television news shows has contributed to the mass collective consciousness in U.S. society. Nonprofessional "innocent bystanders" have shot some of the most haunting images burned in our brains by repeated airing on television. These include footage of the Oklahoma City bombing, the beating of Rodney King by police officers in Los Angeles, the site of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics bombing, and, the most famous, the assassination of John Kennedy in 1963.

By teaching students to use home video camcorders, we are offering them access to media. But even if their work is never shown to wider audiences, the self-expression of their concerns, interests and dreams gives voice to those who have been silenced in our culture. These video shorts offer students a script for discussing and coming to terms with personal issues. Formal schooling often silences students at a time when the issues they face grow in complexity (Gutierrez, et al, 1993).

One of my students, Jose, is the child of recent Salvadoran immigrants. Although he does well in school and has mastered English, he clearly displays bicultural ambivalence -- a hostility to the mainstream culture which emerges as anger toward his more popular, Americanized peers, combined with deep self-deprecation. During a workshop exercise on storyboards, Jose produced three separate stories along the same theme. In "I Don't What To Be A Duck" the main character expresses revulsion of "ducks" and fears that he is changing into a "duck" despite his mother's assurances to the contrary. In the final frame, he changes and accepts his fate -- "I'm a duck."

Jose made a video short based on his storyboard. At the end, the main character says, "Because of my hatred, I am now the thing that I hate -- a duck, living in a palace too large for me." What Jose had struggled with articulating in conversations, he was able to express using visual literacy. By "scripting" his fears of assimilation, Jose was able to begin formulating a response. Jose created a sequel to his story in which the main character discovers that he can transform back by repeating the "magic words" inside his head.

Whether we believe we are developing critical thinking skills, or equipping students to participate in the new video "folk art" movement or providing a mode of self-expression, it is clear that all of these objectives can be served by creating a curriculum that uses hands-on experimentation as the focus of visual literacy. Much has been made of the fact that the "Trench Coat Mafia" filmed a narrative that eerily foreshadowed their later devastating rampage. These boys were making very clear their thoughts and intentions and no one listened. Imagine how different the scenario might have been had their video been used to begin a dialogue on our culture's tendency to solve problems through violence and oppression.

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