

2-1-2001

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Marie F. Doan Holbein
State University of West Georgia

Valerie J. Bristor
Florida Atlantic University

Noorchaya Yahya
Florida Atlantic University

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Recommended Citation

Doan Holbein, M. F., Bristor, V. J., & Yahya, N. (2001). A Model for Using Television and Video to Motivate Writing. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 41 (3). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol41/iss3/4

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A Model for Using Television and Video to Motivate Writing

Marie F. Doan Holbein
State University of West Georgia

Valerie J. Bristor
Florida Atlantic University

Noorchaya Yahya
Florida Atlantic University

ABSTRACT

Three university consultants developed a model to explore the effectiveness of using television and video to motivate writing. Following a series of motivational and brainstorming sessions using television, video, and popular literature, twenty-three fifth grade students were assigned to cooperative groups where they wrote and videotaped dramatizations of short “teaser” scripts. Observations derived from the completed model reveal the compelling influence of television and video on the lives of children.

Research indicates that by the time young children begin school, they have been exposed to 5,000 hours of television (Considine & Haley, 1992). The use of television and video can be an instrumental resource for integrating imagery into literacy instruction at the listening

level as well as motivation for script development (reading, writing, dramatization). According to Considine & Haley (1992)

Teachers need to be aware of how much their students watch television and what they watch. Drawing on these existing viewing patterns and behaviors provides a valuable insight into our students' lives beyond the classroom. It provides a common reference source that can be a potential teaching tool, enabling us to integrate the living room into the classroom...By emphasizing the process, not simply the programs, teachers can begin to develop both critical thinking and critical viewing skills... (p. 44-45)

Visual literacy research suggests that the integration of imagery into instruction can result in the promotion of writing and the improvement of student comprehension (Considine & Haley, 1992). Sticht, Beck, Hauke, Kleiman, and James (cited in Sticht & James, 1984) found that 10 out of 12 studies reported the successful transfer of comprehension skills when training in various auditing tasks took place prior to subsequent reading-task performances. Reading, writing, and dramatizing scripts enhances language use and reading comprehension by requiring group cooperation and engaging affective as well as cognitive processes through a variety of literacy interactions (Hanson-Smith, 1997; Hoyt, 1992).

Research by W. Collins (cited in Considine & Haley, 1992) showed improvement in elementary students' ability to comprehend narratives presented in movies, television, and other audiovisual formats. Television was also used successfully to illustrate socially appropriate language for secondary ESOL students (Lincoln-Porter & Washburn, 1997). A research study using a favorite television program to improve attitudes toward reading demonstrated significant positive changes in attitude on several attitude scale items such as reading trade books in class and writing scripts. The use of trade books emphasizing television programs and production seemed to motivate the reading of other trade books (Bristol & Ransom, 1997). Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood (1999) advocate that teachers recognize "the expertise that students

bring to the learning environment, the pleasures that popular culture produce for students, and the multiple readings that students produce from popular culture” (p. 28).

Based on the review of previous studies, three university consultants developed a model to explore the effectiveness of using television and video to motivate writing. The purpose of this paper is to describe the implementation of that model, share reflections, and make recommendations for further applications.

Description of the Model

Fifth-grade students from an urban elementary school, their classroom teacher, and three university consultants participated in the implementation of the model. Following a series of motivational and brainstorming sessions using television, video, and popular literature, the students were assigned to cooperative groups where they wrote “teaser” scripts, short opening scenes used to capture viewer attention.

The topics selected and developed into scripts by the students were varied and were characterized by events at home, on the school bus, and the shopping mall. The edited example below describes the opening scene of such a script.

Plot: Stephanie finds a puppy at the bus stop, but mom won’t let her keep it.

Characters: Narrator, Bus Driver, Puppy, Mom, and Stephanie

Setting: Bus stop

Puppy: “Bark, bark” (in the book bag)

Stephanie: I’m going to sneak you into my room.

The students segued from script writing to rehearsal and finally to videotaped dramatizations. Field notes recorded by the consultants

during these phases reveal the compelling influence of media on the lives of young children and suggest the motivational benefits of script writing aspects of television and video performances for impacting literacy.

Procedures for Implementing the Model

The twenty-three fifth-grade students and their teacher met with the university consultants for 45 minutes during the scheduled language arts block, 9:30 a.m. to 10:15 a.m., each week for a period of eight weeks. During any given session, one to three of the university consultants were present, each rotating roles as principal facilitator. The students engaged in cooperative group work, script writing, and videotaping of dramatizations.

The first session began with a viewing of a Star Trek video segment of The Bionic Bunny Show (Brown & Brown, 1984; Weiner, 1983). The ensuing discussion focused on developing television shows, creating special effects, reading scripts, rehearsing, memorizing lines, using prompts, filming, and editing. Each subsequent session began with a review of the previous week's activities.

During the second session the students discussed and compared the process of filming shows from scripts written specially for television and those adapted from books. The university facilitator read orally to the students from the book Ramona: Behind the Scenes of a Television Show (Scott, 1988) to underscore the salient features of adapting literature to television. The students discovered that the elements of story structure (characters, traits, settings, and plot) were important considerations in scripts as well as in narrative text. Following another oral reading, this time from the book Ramona Quimby, Age 8 (Cleary, 1981), and a whole group class discussion, the session culminated with the completion of a chart of characters and elements of story structure (See Appendices B and C).

The students continued their study of creating television shows during the third session. The university facilitator continued to orally

read selected portions from each book, Ramona: Behind The Scenes of a Television Show (Scott, 1998) and Ramona Quimby, Age 8 (Cleary, 1981). The class discussed special effects, props, and particular job responsibilities associated creating television shows. They also developed a chart, which focused on special effects and props necessary to recreate the scenes on video (See Appendix D).

The fourth session marked the beginning of students working in groups to write their own “teaser” scripts. Based on the classroom teacher’s recommendations, cooperative groups of three to four students were formed. Each member was randomly given a necklace to identify his/her particular role in the writing project as narrator, scriptwriter, director, or editor (See Appendix A). The classroom teacher was designated as “sponsor” and the facilitators as “producers.” The groups used a storyboard for developing their own plots, characters, settings, and events. The students were encouraged to continue their discussions and their work during the intervening days between sessions with the university facilitators.

During the fifth session, one of the three consultants who had visited a television studio, observed actual filming, and met television personalities and production crew members, shared a “picture album” of her experiences. The students were able to see pictures of real-life examples related to earlier topics of discussion. This sharing session was videotaped to familiarize the student with the camera and establish a level of comfort during filming.

The sixth and seventh sessions were devoted to writing the “teasers” and rehearsing them. Two of the facilitators circulated among groups as they worked and shared ideas with them. The students briefly rehearsed their completed work during the eighth session which culminated with videotaping of the dramatizations (See Appendices E).

Reflections

The level of enthusiasm with which the students participated in the project was inspiring. At the onset of each session they greeted the

university facilitators with bright smiles and eager dispositions. Their guarded participation in the cooperative group was readily overcome, and soon they could be heard chatting, discussing, negotiating and deliberating. Occasional rowdiness was easily subsided as the class responded well to both verbal and nonverbal cues. Some groups were more productive as natural leadership emerged from self-starting students. Other groups that lacked such leadership tended to vacillate among topics and found it more difficult to focus on the task at hand.

The group process of selecting themes for each script revealed some compelling insights into the students and their fascination with violence. On several occasions, the university facilitators had to guide the groups from stories about “grizzly” occurrences to more sedate day-to-day issues related to home, school, and community. Humor became a predominant factor as writing moved from intensity to levity.

Selecting late spring semester, a time of year relatively free of stress and interruption, was critical to the effective implementation of this model. End-of-the-year calendars are replete with testing mandates and the preparatory preamble associated with standardized assessment. The relaxed atmosphere in the classroom may have been due to students’ reactions to earlier, more intensive, test preparation; it appeared to provide a catalyst for unconstrained engagement.

Recommendations

Suggestions for future implementation may include:

- a. Extend the project to several weeks so that students can write complete scripts and dramatize them in their totality.
- b. Allow students to write scripts on word processors so that they can easily proof, edit, and create multiple copies for rehearsals.
- c. Enhance the project by allowing students to create costumes, develop sets, and create special effects.
- d. Expand script writing and dramatization into a study of

careers related to television. Several students were particularly interested in special jobs and were heard to comment about their future career goals in television and film.

Conclusion

Television and video were popular media and served as potent motivators for the students' participation in the scriptwriting model. According to Considine & Haley (1992), a video adaptation of a story is "...a powerful instructional ally..." for enhancing both recall and comprehension. (p. 56)

The enthusiasm of the students participating in this model appears to be consistent with the research findings which suggest that using cooperative groups to write and dramatize scripts promotes language use and reading comprehension (Considine & Haley, 1992; Hanson-Smith, 1997; Hoyt, 1992). Focusing on a popular character from children's literature such as "Ramona" (Cleary, 1981), supported the notion that teachers capitalize on the "popular culture" that children bring with them to school (Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood, 1999, p. 28).

Television is a significant part of children's lives (Considine & Haley, 1992), and educators should consider using television as an instruction tool to enhance literacy curricula. Television programming can foster reader-response approaches to understanding and interpreting literature, facilitate the development of contemporary communication skills, and enhance second language instruction (Flood & Lapp, 1995).

Students who are empowered to draw upon their cultural experiences in risk-free cooperative group settings will develop their writing and literacy skills through meaningful applications. Educators who are cognizant of the potency of television and video as motivators, will open the doors for their students to new horizons of learning.

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Dr. Marie Doan Holbein is a faculty member at State University of West Georgia. Dr. Valerie J. Bristor and Dr. Noorchaya Yahya are faculty members of Florida Atlantic University.

Appendix A
Cooperative Group Assignments

Narrator	Narrates story during filming
Script Writer/Screen Writer	Writes down dialogue as the group develops the story
**Editor/Producer	Checks for accuracy of all details
Director	Directs acting during rehearsal and filming

** Groups with more than four people will have separate roles

Appendix B
Data from Charts Made From Class Discussions
(Session #2)

Characters

Ramona Mr. Quimby

Beezus Mrs. Quimby

Picky Picky

Descriptions of the Characters based on Class Discussion
Following Daily Shared Reading

- Beezus: Sleepy because she stayed up too late with her friends last night at the spend the night party.
- Ramona: Upset with her Mom because her Mom put a raw egg instead of a boiled egg in her lunch.
- Mrs. Quimby: Tired of cooking and upset with Ramona because of “egg incident.” Mrs. Quimby tried to explain it was a mistake.
- Mr. Quimby: Frustrated because he can’t draw his foot. He works at a “Santa’s helper” warehouse where it is very cold. He’s studying to be an art teacher.
- Picky Picky: The cat who eats everything that others don’t want.

Appendix C
Chart of Elements of Story Structure
(Session# 2)

<u>Character</u>	<u>Character Description</u>
Beezus (She stayed up too late with her friends)	sleepy
Ramona	upset with her Mom for putting a raw egg in her lunch
Mrs. Quimby	tired of cooking
Mr. Quimby	frustrated about his drawing
Picky Picky (cat)	eating what other don't want
<u>Setting</u>	<u>Problem</u>
Ramona's house: Kitchen, dinning room, living room, couch	Beezus is grumpy
	Girls don't like tongue
	Ramona's frustrated with Mom
	Mr. Quimby's mad because he can't draw his foot
	Mrs. Quimby's mad because Ramona is still upset about the raw egg mother put in Ramona's lunch
	The girls have to cook dinner

Appendix D
Special Effects/Props
(Session #3)

Kitchen furniture: refrigerator, tables, chairs

Living room furniture: couch, wall hangings, wallpaper for all
rooms

Fireplace

Toys for Ramona

Yard equipment, hoses, etc.

Noise makers for rain and thunder

Appendix E
Sample Script: The Puppy

Plot: Stephanie finds a puppy at the bus stop, but mom won't let her keep it.
Characters: Narrator, Bus driver, puppy, Mom, and Stephanie
Setting: Bus stop, house
Narrator: In this scene, Stephanie finds a puppy at the bus stop, and she takes it home.

Bus driver: Go find a seat so you can go home.

Puppy: "Bark, bark" (in the book bag)

Puppy: "Woof, woof"

Stephanie: I'm going to sneak you into my room.

Bus driver: Next time, keep the dog off the bus.

Stephanie: Nothing mom!

Narrator: Stephanie's mom comes out of the kitchen.

Mom: Get that dog out of my house!

Narrator: Just then, the dog chews on Dad's \$125 shoes.

Mom: Get rid of that dog. You're grounded

Stephanie: But mom,

Mom: No but's, just do it.

Stephanie: Okay. mom.