



Articles

2007

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Recommended Citation

Owings Swan, Kathleen; Hofer, Mark J.; and Levstik, Linda S., "Camera! Action! Collaborate with Digital Moviemaking" (2007). *Articles*. 43.
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Camera! Action! Collaborate with Digital Moviemaking

Kathleen Owings Swan, Mark Hofer, and Linda S. Levstik



When people talk to me about the digital divide, I think of it not being so much about who has access to what technology as who knows how to create and express themselves in this new language of the screen... Today we work with the written or spoken word as the primary form of communication. But we also need to understand the importance of graphics, music, and cinema, which are just as powerful and in some ways more deeply intertwined with young people's culture. We live and work in a visually sophisticated world, so we must be sophisticated in using all the forms of communication, not just the written word.—George Lucas¹

For better or for worse, the classroom can't always compete with the cinema. Students better recall cinematic dialog (May the force be with you!) than Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and too often learn about Vietnam from Forrest Gump rather than from engaging classroom inquiry. As George Lucas notes, our students live in a world saturated with images provided by television, of course, but also streaming video, video phones, portable video games, and films.² We can rail against these changes,

or we can leverage the power of graphics, music, and cinema to support richer historical inquiry and interpretation. A "user-friendly" digital tool, moviemaking, supports historical teaching and learning in particularly interesting ways.

Broadly defined, digital moviemaking integrates a variety of media (images, sound, text, video, narration) to communicate with an audience. There is near-ubiquitous access to the necessary software (MovieMaker and iMovie

are bundled free with their respective operating systems) and hardware (computers with Internet access, digital cameras, etc.). This easy access, along with the open-ended nature of digital movies, presents powerful opportunities to design student-centered, inquiry-based history projects.

We can engage students as digital directors. Students can not only develop historical questions and select and evaluate sources relevant to those questions, but can frame (literally and figuratively) and present historical interpretations. To our knowledge, little attention has been given to the impact of this kind of experience on children's historical thinking and learning. Curious about this point, we began experimenting with digital moviemaking in a fifth grade social studies classroom.

Documenting History

At Sojourner Truth Elementary School in a mid-size city in a southern state,

approximately 70 students spent two weeks constructing digital historical documentaries in which they used web-based primary resources, including digital music, photographs, and images artifacts to construct a narrative of an event that had been part of their study of American History.³ One goal of the project involved introducing students to a more inquiry-oriented approach to history.⁴ We envisioned small groups of students working collaboratively to develop digital historical narratives rooted in historical evidence, somewhat similar to a Ken Burns documentary. The teacher agreed and allotted the project 35 minutes daily for each of her three social studies classes over a two-week period in late spring. She had access to a laptop computer lab that could be wheeled into the classroom so that twenty groups of two to three students could work simultaneously on the computers.



Getting Started

Students came into the project with some computer skills (searching the Internet, word processing, etc.), but no experience with the creation of digital videos and little experience with searching historical archives. We introduced the project by asking students to examine several examples of documentary film techniques and then identified ways in which they might approach the creation of their own documentary. They might, for example, consider whether their documentary would include a first person account, a third person narrator, or some combination of the two. We then provided a list of topics related to their on-going study of American history and asked students to identify a topic of interest. After organizing students into groups of two or three based on their choice of topic, we provided them with archives—folders of background resources to support student inquiry. For example, we gave students studying the Civil Rights Movement documents related to Rosa Parks, the Montgomery Bus Boycott,

and the 1964 March on Washington. This turned out to be a crucial component of the project.



From Storyboard to Movie

Once students had read and discussed their archives, each group created a storyboard, a frame-by-frame mock-up showing how students planned to illustrate and narrate their films. Creating storyboards consumed considerable time as students had to identify the focus of their documentary (What was it about?), the most appropriate evidence (Which pictures or documents best explained this event?), and the most effective narrative arc for their story (Establish the beginning, middle, end).

This writing phase of the project followed a four-step process including prewriting, drafting, revising, and sharing. It is important to note that we asked students to think about the elements of a documentary, and the research process, as well as the substance of their narratives before they used the MovieMaker technology. In previous experiences with digital moviemaking, we had learned that the computer tended to distract the students from the inquiry, students often preferring to play with the features of the program rather than explore the historical documents. This initial phase of the project encompassed five class sessions.

After the students had drafted their storyboards and scripts, we demonstrated MovieMaker software, pointing out the possibilities and limitations of the program. While students were provided with the bulk of the digital documents and music, a short tutorial was given on using search engines as well as exploring historical archives in case students needed to supplement the collection provided. Finally, students spent approximately five class periods using the collected resources and their written narrative to construct documentary movies. Their documentaries “premiered” to an audience of parents, teachers and students during a film festival complete

with popcorn and awards voted on by a panel of jurors.⁵



Lessons Learned

During the implementation of this project we learned many lessons that may help inform future efforts. First and foremost, digital moviemaking thoroughly engaged students from beginning to end. Even during the preliminary writing phase it was not uncommon to overhear students talking about their works-in-progress in the hallways and after class. There were vocal disagreements between group members and giggles and smiles as well. Once the project shifted over to actually creating the movies on the computers, much animated discussion over use of a song or rehearsal for an impassioned narration ensued. Despite games being available on the student computers, it was rare for students to stray from their filmmaking. While their engagement might have been the result of the “novelty effect,” it may have been attributable to the self-directed nature of the work.⁶ Indeed, student-created narratives in any form can be an effective means to engage students in learning content.⁷

It is a common criticism that the technology assumes too prominent a role in classroom projects, with the content fading into the background. By beginning the process with paper and pencil and emphasizing the writing process of the narrative, however, students were forced to focus first on the content of their documentaries. Interestingly, in those cases where a group’s narrative was shallow or derivative, students were likely to have relied on their textbook account rather than their archival sources. Movies where students made more use of archival resources tended to be more interesting, but also more historically sound.



A Forum

A consistent recommendation in the social studies education literature calls for technology to be introduced in the context of learning social studies content.⁸ In this

project, much of the content learning and narrative construction took place prior to working with the technology. On the other hand, the technology does seem to shape students' use of sources in interesting ways.

For instance, the format for the movies required careful selection of images and accompanying text or narration because of time limits. The three-minute time frame meant that students had to be judicious in what they selected and so they were more likely to think more carefully and debate more vigorously about how to construct their historical narrative and about how best to make their historical case. This remained the case even for students who relied on textbook accounts. These students still had to select images and text that they considered most significant and best able to support their storyline.

One unanticipated outcome of this project was that all the students in the class were able to participate in meaningful ways. The classrooms in which we worked integrated students with special needs. Roughly twenty percent of the total population was identified as special needs students with Individual Education Plans (IEP). For example, four of the students had hearing loss or deafness, which required an interpreter/signer in the classroom. This type of project offers different communicative pathways, enabling more students to be more successful in more ways. As a result, special needs students are able to more fully participate and share with their peers.

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework provides one way of thinking about this through its three-part model for thinking and learning.⁹ UDL proponents identify three distinct but interconnected networks through which people connect with knowledge and understanding: recognition networks (learning information), strategic networks (learning processes and problem solving), and affective networks (engaging emotionally with learning). A digital moviemaking project invites every student to find meaningful ways to contrib-

ute to the group product, whether it is in the research, writing, or development phases. One good example is a powerful documentary on Rosa Parks created by three deaf students (scroll down to the social studies examples of student work at www.ddguild.org/examples.html).



Challenges for the Educator

While there were clear successes and promising results from this project, we also identified significant challenges such as students' over-reliance on textbook narratives. Rather than developing their own interpretive lens through which to view the Great Depression, World War II, or the Civil Rights Movement, for instance, some of the documentaries operated like expository reports of facts, names and chronologies of events. Anchoring the documentary in a historical question, in our experience, encourages students to break away from simple repetition of someone else's information. One mark of skilled writers or journalists is finding an effective "angle" or voice and grounding their reporting in that voice. If students are challenged to develop a question that focuses their attention away from the text and towards analyzing sources, they might be more likely to craft a more nuanced, insightful narrative.



Class Time

Another more pragmatic concern that surfaced in doing this project was the class time required to implement the exercise. While the variety of content skills learned or reinforced in developing a digital documentary (history content, writing process, inquiry, synthesis, communication, etc.) are certainly valuable, in an era of high-stakes testing, it is difficult to devote large blocks of time to a single project. For this type of project to be more easily implemented in the classroom, we need to find ways to pare down the time required for implementation.

We found that developing and then loading on to each computer an archive

of possible images, music, etc. helped students more efficiently develop their movies. While this requires "up-front" time for the teacher, the anticipation of possible student choices, and careful attention to providing multiple perspectives in the archival resources, significantly reduces "in class" time and, even more importantly, encourages more interesting historical work.

Not surprisingly, we also encountered technical challenges in implementing the project that created some stress for the teacher. We found Moviemaker to be limited in some ways (students were not easily able to include narration and music simultaneously) and overwhelming in others (excessive options for transitions, titles, and windows for storing images and audio files). Some of these challenges seem to be minimized when using Apple's iMovie, but some limitations are inevitable.

Another significant challenge related to storing the necessary files involved in the process. Because we completed the project with the school's mobile laptop cart, it was important to back up the students' files and work at the end of each session to ensure that other students did not inadvertently delete needed material. Because of the large number of images and music files in the students' archives and the large size of the completed movies this was a significant logistical challenge. While no projects were lost during the project, there were a few close calls. In the end, even though these technical difficulties were certainly a challenge, none of them presented a fundamental roadblock to completing the movies. For the most part, both the teacher and students were able to successfully navigate these issues and produce products of which they were proud.

The Digital Directors Guild

As noted earlier, student-created digital documentaries are a promising, challenging, and evolving project in classrooms. This kind of effort is strengthened when educators work collaboratively. The Digital Directors Guild at www.ddguild.org/examples.html provides a space on

the internet where K-16 educators can explore digital moviemaking, its place in the curriculum, and its impact on student learning. We created these webpages in the hopes of building a community of practitioners and scholars to help chart the course of digital moviemaking in the social studies. The word “guild” can be defined as a group of “individuals engaged in kindred pursuits.” It is our hope that this type of informal, non-hierarchical space will bring together individuals from many different areas and interests to create and implement these kinds of projects. We invite readers of *Social Studies and the Young Learner* to join us in investigating digital moviemaking in history and across the whole range of social studies. 🎬

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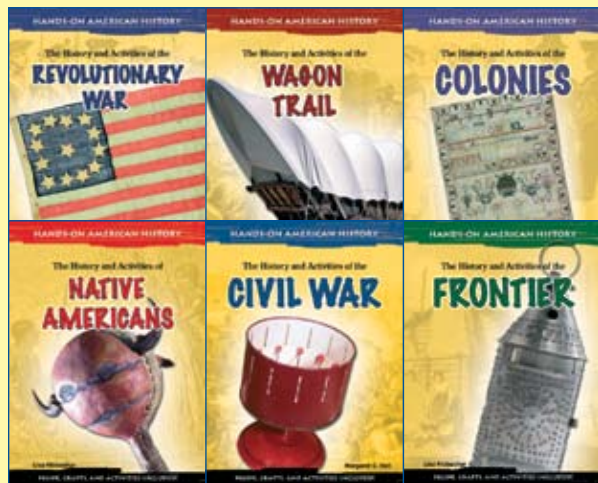
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Hands-On American History

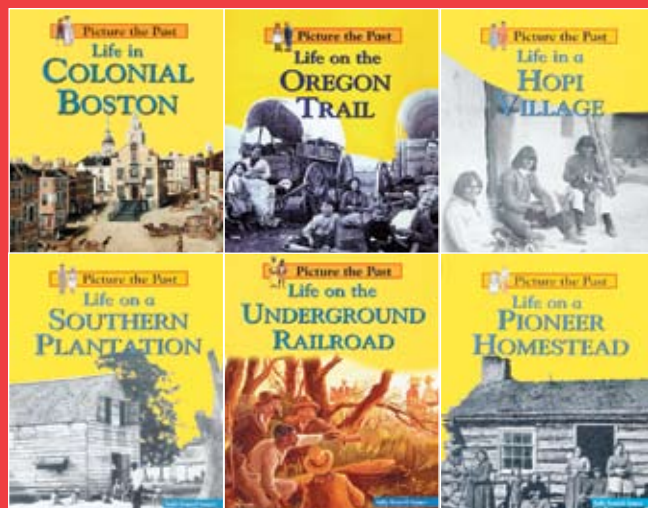
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