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Teens Directing their Education:

How Student-Produced Digital Films Promote Social Responsibility

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Literature Review (as part of a research proposal)

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Digital Film making offers promising educational communication tools to support or transform teachers' pedagogical approaches and students' learning experiences (Kearney and Schuck, 2003). On the one hand, schools are pressuring current educators to up-date their teaching strategies with pertinent technology. On the other hand, with the advent of web-based social networks such as YouTube or Facebook, students' computer proficiency and fascination with communication technologies are as strong as ever.

During the past decade, increasingly affordable cameras and editing software have made it easier for scholastic institutions to equip classes and design programs focused on communicating through the creation of digital films. In addition, the relative simplicity of recent video equipment allows even elementary school children to produce short films using music and graphics. It is clearly time to examine the potential of digital film production as a didactically sound means to enhance teaching methods as well as students' educational engagement and sense of social responsibility.

Close-up on my story

In my position as the curriculum leader of a high school's digital film communication program, which I have developed over the past 15 years, I experienced the importance of designing tasks that engage students intellectually and emotionally. Teaching girls taught me that digital film activities enrich their awareness of how the media manipulate images and messages in order to promote certain behaviours. When projects are devised with this perspective, they give relevance to the female students' technological skill acquisition (Miller, Schweingruber & Brandenburg, 2001), assist conceptual development and encourage self-discovery.

What I have been wondering, however, is whether framing students' learning experience within the creation of their own communication product increases their sense of social responsibility.

Purpose and Assumptions

Purpose

This research will examine the process through which digital films are created by grade ten students in an independent all girl school, in Vancouver, Canada. Its purpose is to discover:

1. What kind of educational goals can digital film tools effectively implement?
2. Which pedagogical approaches are best suited for the digital film making process?
3. How can self-directed, hands-on learning contribute to students' meaningful engagement in their education?
4. In what ways does team work and peer cooperation impact teens' communication and social skills?

Assumptions

One assumption in this paper is that students learn to discover their unique talents while communicating their chosen messages through digital films. Another assumption is that the team work needed to film and edit the audio visual documents enhances the students' organizational skills. A third key assumption is that public screenings of their films to peers, teachers and parents motivate students to achieve a presentable technical quality; thus reinforcing their sense of social awareness through practical contribution.

Statement of the problem

The scope of this investigation is limited to communication technology used within the context of digital film production program classes. It does not include the use of digital film making in subject

specific areas. However, within the film classes, students may develop topics generated by other courses or create films as assignments for other classes. Therefore, my main question is this one: How can the process of creating digital films contribute to the development of students' cognitive skills while enhancing their sense of social responsibility?

Definitions

Social responsibility

In this paper "social responsibility", as defined by British Columbia's Ministry of Education, refers to "*students considering scenarios about realistic situations and working […] in groups to propose solutions or courses of action*".

Student-generated digital films

"Student-generated digital films" are terms associated with opportunities for students to act as scriptwriters, camera operators, editors and directors (Kearney & Schuck, 2004).

Digital Film

In turn, "digital films" may consist of public service announcements, documentaries, short narratives (stories) and music videos, to give only a few examples. "*Digital moviemaking can broadly be defined as the use of a variety of media (images, sound, text, video, and narration) to convey understanding", (*Hofer and Swan, 2005, p.104).

Authentic Learning

Authentic learning activities are meaningful from the student's point of view and socially relevant; as opposed to artificial experiences often designed by institutions, which can be seen as unrealistic by learners (Stein, Isaacs; Andrews, 2004).

Selected Literature

Despite the increased popularity, availability and ease of use, surprisingly few studies have been made about student-produced digital films in education. This deficiency can be attributable to rapid technological innovation, which make it challenging for scholars to conduct substantive enquiries (Kearney and Schuck, 2003).

The articles chosen for this review have been selected on account of the insights they provide regarding the relatively recent implementation of digital film and multimedia tools in education. Some papers focus on the use of those tools for curriculum content acquisition, while others concentrate on their emotional and social implications.

After summarizing each literature item, and deliberating its validity, I will scrutinize the selected papers to uncover the educational impact of student-directed digital films in the following sequence. First, knowledge acquisition of students through digital films is explored. Second, the pedagogical methods used in this environment are analyzed. Third, affective skills and students' engagement in their own learning are appraised. Finally, the concept of social responsibility, linked with students communicating authentic messages, rarely explicitly tackled in the body of reviewed literature, provides a fertile research gap to explore and discuss.

Intellectually relevant technology

In the United States, Hofner and Owing-Swan (2005) researched the effectiveness of student-produced films for content acquisition in two graduate level social studies classes. The investigators observed the classes only for a short time and the projects were confined to strict historical investigation guidelines; thus possibly constricting the learners' sense of authentic learning. However the researchers'

rigour, supported by the university context, lends validity to their reflections on the risks of concentrating on the technology rather than the subject content.

Innovative teaching methods

In Australia, Kearney and Schuck (2003) investigated elementary and high schools using student digital film making as a didactic method. They wrote articles questioning, among other issues, the role of the teacher within this context. Their research was funded by a grant from Apple Computer Australia, which may have biased the findings. Nevertheless the case studies conducted, highlighting best practices, are valuable testaments of fresh teaching approaches elicited by technological advancements.

Authentic learning and student engagement

In their quasi-experimental research, Tatar and Robinson (2003) compared a class of American biology high school students taking digital photos of their laboratory experiment with a similar class using traditional scientific reporting techniques. Irrespective of its statistical inaccuracy, this article managed to show noteworthy students' attitudinal changes through its qualitative observations.

Enhanced communication and social awareness

Blackall, Lockyer & Brown (2004) presented their own research proposal, partly sponsored by Apple Australia, suggesting that grade ten students, studying a media literacy unit, create digital television community news to reinforce ethical concepts. This proposed experiment suggests that digital film making can provide an opportunity for social engagement and enable students to participate in society while developing an awareness of the constructed nature of media information. Although they limit the projects to documentaries, based on a journalistic code of ethics, the authors' discourse presents an active prototype of student social engagement.

As participants of an international multimedia competition, Steelman, Grable & Vasu (2005) relate their experience and discuss how projects centered on global issues expand students' sense of responsibility. Due to its affiliation with the contest and its Apple USA sponsorship, this paper is evidently advocacy literature. Nonetheless it gives striking examples of student-generated multimedia projects created in a spirit of social contribution. The environmental and humanitarian awareness integrated in "Zero Waste" and "The landmines project" has obvious social implications. Not to mention that students' products are seen by a global teenage audience.

Finally, since this proposed research will concentrate on a girl school, the article that Miller, Schweingruber & Brandenburg (2001) wrote in Texas about the shrinking technological gender gap serves to show that the limited framework of the investigation is valid.

Analysis

1. *What kind of educational goals can digital film technology effectively implement?*

Steelman et al. (2005) mention that the complexity of the experience involved in multimedia productions helps students create their own knowledge. Also, children's retention of the learning process improves when they use visual aids (Tatar and Robinson, 2003).

However, there is a need for the development of assessment strategies enabling a better grasp of the conceptual learning occurring with the use of communication technology (Kearney and Schuck, 2005; Steelman, Grable & Vasu, 2005). While student-generated productions enliven participants' interest in curriculum content (Steelman et al., 2005), it is generally acknowledged that the projects' design must be congruent with well-defined academic standards to achieve the maximum impact in terms of knowledge acquisition (Hofer and Owings Swan, 2005).

2. *Which pedagogical approaches are best suited for the digital film making process?*

The teacher's role in this type of creative, student-centered educational environment leans toward technical coaching, and flexibility is needed (Tatar and Robinson, 2003) to allow students to work autonomously and at their own rhythm (Kearney & Schuck, 2005). It is commonly agreed that to create a sense of student ownership, teachers benefit from allowing film crews to choose their topics and cinematographic genres (Steelman et al., 2005).

Again, the challenge is to balance the students' relative freedom of expression with educational objectives. Among other hurdles, teachers must prepare examples demonstrating the various stages of movie making (Hofer and Owings-Swan, 2005). Storyboards, scripts and final products help students gain a better understanding of what they are expected to accomplish both in terms of content and product. Students can benefit from didactic techniques such as: mind maps (Kearney and Schuck, 2005), pitching initial concepts to peers for feedback and mentoring each other (Blackall et al., 2004).

3. *How can self-directed, hands-on learning contribute to students' meaningful engagement in their education?*

Most of the reviewed studies attest to the fact that student-directed, inquiry-based productions, facilitated by the flexibility of digital film making tools, are motivating and engaging (Hofer and Owings-Swan, 2005). They enhance student interest (Tatar and Robinson, 2003), self-discipline, sense of ownership as well as self-esteem and autonomy (Kearney and Schuck, 2005).

4. *In what ways does team work and peer cooperation impact teens' communication and social skills?*

Digital film technology creates authentic learning, transforming the way students communicate about their work. It also gives them an arena to share their findings with others (Tatar and Robinson,

2003). Activities designed for digital film projects also encourage active group collaboration (Kearney and Schuck, 2005).

A predominant way of communicating through digital film in the classroom is by creating news broadcasts, documentaries and public service announcements. Developing "*accountability, notions of citizenship, fairness […] and honesty*" (Blackall et al., 2004, p. 61) is anticipated from the application of ethical concepts while creating these types of journalistic pieces. There is, however, hardly any research specifically measuring the correlation between student-generated digital films and enhanced social responsibility.

Gaps and opportunities for future research

The literature reviewed in this paper is limited to contexts in which teachers could access digital film tools, and had some technological knowledge or assistance. This is obviously not the case on a global basis and much effort will have to be directed toward a more equitable access to this kind of innovative technology. Further studies are also needed to investigate the pedagogy and assessment linked with digital film making in the classroom. The unresolved issue of teaching technological skills while endeavouring to deliver curriculum content is another significant research field. Finally, gathering data and analyzing students' communication skills and social development are areas rich in ethical complexity and ripe for investigation.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrated that teachers can support their instructional strategies with digital film communication tools. The data analyzed present the emergence of new student-teacher paradigms in this type of educational environment. Furthermore, the articles inspected in this work indicate a relation between team-produced films and improved communicative skills. Finally, student-directed films are

linked with enhanced self-expression. My up-coming research, centered on the connection between student-generated digital films and social responsibility, will attempt to substantiate these conclusions.

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