A New Perspective on Inquiry: A Case Study of Digital Video Production

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Using digital video projects in the classroom is still a largely uncharted curricular territory. However, as I watched the research processes of two fifth-grade students, Nicole and Kendra, working on a digital documentary video on African American history, I learned how new literacies can change inquiry learning at school. The girls found new ways of interacting with their subject matter by using Ulead Video Studio Editor 8, a computer program that allows for still images, digital video, and audio tracks to be woven together and edited into a movie project.

As a former teacher and current professor with interests in and experiences with new literacies, I teamed up with a teacher who was also interested in using video production as part of student inquiry projects. William Clark and I collaborated in designing a project that resulted in student-produced documentary videos about topics of interest to them. Mr. Clark played a central role in co-developing and co-implementing this project. I worked with Mr. Clark and the students on this video project over eight months, typically one to two days each week. The students met several days each with Mr. Clark for their English language arts block. Students paired up and chose topics of interest, including the Dominican Republic, African American history, electricity, World War II, and Jamaica. To get a close look at the intricacies of using video as part of student research, I will focus specifically on Nicole and Kendra's project.

There were eight students in Mr. Clark's English language arts group. They met with Mr. Clark for extended, small-group time (the students were designated struggling with academic literacy performance in relation to their peers according to test scores and grade-level standards). Mr. Clark and I reasoned that the students did not need a reductionistic and behavioristic curriculum focusing on literacy "skills." Rather, we decided that they needed engaging, motivating, and intellectually challenging opportunities to use print and produce meanings in diverse and multifaceted ways. Our assumption was that struggling students—as much as any other students—will need to develop digital literacies for a rapidly changing society in which new ways of using literacy and technology are a necessity (New London Group). Along these lines, we reasoned that creating access to a curriculum in which the students worked with new literacies would help to prepare them for social futures in a rapidly changing world outside the school.

As Nicole and Kendra used the video production process to organize and understand their subject matter, they gained a "new view" on their topic and found new ways of using print and meaning that

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were specific to the new media and digital technologies that they were using. Their literacy practices moved markedly into the visual realm—an idea that literacy scholars have identified (Kress, Literacy) as a phenomenon of the rapidly changing (increasingly onscreen) modes of public communication. In sum, the girls’ research processes involved new ways of interacting with their subject matter, which resulted in qualitative changes in their approaches to reading, writing, and inquiry.

Setting the Stage for Working with Video: Research and Recording

Kendra and Nicole began the project with familiar inquiry activities, such as library research, reading books on African American history, and taking notes on the topic. They also conducted Internet research into their topic by searching Google on the topic of African American history. This led them to several civil rights Web sites developed for students conducting research on the topic, as well as informational Web sites such as Infoplease (http://www.infoplease.com) and Answers.com (http://www.answers.com), among many others. These Web searches involved new reading practices that differed qualitatively from the book-based research that they were used to. Their reading paths (typical of Web-based, onscreen reading) were far from linear. Rather, their reading took nonlinear pathways as they read selectively, taking links as needed, reading only the necessary parts of Web pages, and returning to their search results in search of other pages. Their reading in hypertext—the format of the Web that allows the user to follow links through texts on Web pages—involved the new literacy practice of reading nonlinear texts. Espen J. Aarseth writes:

A nonlinear text . . . is not simply one fixed sequence of letters, words, and sentences but one in which the words or sequence of words may differ from reading to reading because of the shape, conventions, or mechanisms of the text. . . . [T]he linear text may be seen as a special case of the nonlinear in which the convention is to read word by word from beginning to end. Recently, because of the computer, certain types of nonlinear texts have received attention from educational, technological, and theoretical circles. (51)

As they moved back and forth from the Google search-results page and the actual Web pages, Nicole and Kendra evaluated their content (in conversation with Mr. Clark and me) for its potential usefulness. As they became more familiar with their topics, they became more discriminating about which pages to spend time with and which ones to cast aside in search of another. With so much information at their fingertips, these two students practiced new ways of reading and evaluating information typical of the information age in which they will grow up (Reinking).

In addition, Kendra and Nicole decided which pages or parts of Web pages to read online and on the spot. They also decided which hyperlink texts to follow and which to skip. For especially useful pages or in instances when they didn’t have enough time, the girls made tactical decisions about which articles to print out and put into their research folder for later reading. They gathered and read information with a specific purpose in mind: to acquire and synthesize enough information to write a script that they would later perform (while Mr. Clark and I recorded it using a digital video camera) and then import into their video project. As they gathered information, they gradually processed and synthesized it, going back and forth between research and writing, into a script form. Their script cast Kendra as facing an impending and difficult test on the civil rights movement; Nicole was the knowing student who then tutored Kendra for her test. The girls transformed information that they had gathered from books and the Web into a new genre and spoke it through their writing voices. The following is an excerpt from their script:

Kendra: This is miserable. I have a test coming up on the civil rights movement soon. I don’t know anything about it. Do you know anything about it?

Nicole: Well, yes.

Kendra: I’ll never pass this crazy test.

Nicole: Never say never! I know lots of things about the civil rights movement!

Kendra: Can you tell me?

Nicole: Sure. First, the civil rights movement is cool to learn about. Did you know that?

Kendra: No.

Nicole: Well, civil rights are the rights that each person has to live by the same laws.
Kendra: What was the civil rights movement about?

Nicole: The civil rights movement was about when people were separated because of their color. I can give you some definitions.

Kendra: Sure, that would be cool.

Nicole went on to define several key terms from her civil rights study, including rights, equal protection, opportunity, citizen, race, and so on. As the dialogue progressed, continuing to cast Kendra in the questioning student role, Nicole went on to narrate from key events in civil rights history while Kendra took notes. The last scene from this performance featured Kendra excitedly showing Nicole her test on which she received an A, thanks to Nicole’s help.

The girls wrote the script in anticipation of performing it in front of the camera and eventually importing it into their video project and editing it. This changed their literacy and inquiry processes from the beginning. As they were searching for information, they could evaluate the information based on the likelihood that it would help them write a script. Even at this early stage in their research, the inclusion of video in the inquiry process shaped their overall literacy activities by giving them a clear and motivating purpose for their research and writing.

Working in Video Studio Editor

After the script had been performed and recorded, Kendra and Nicole began their work in the Video Studio Editor program. With the help of Mr. Clark, they imported the digital recording of the performance described above into the video editing program. Mr. Clark explained the layout of the screen in Video Studio Editor and the options/functions that they had available for editing their work. Figure 1 is a screen shot of the students’ work at one point in the project. It provides an illustration program’s interface, which is similar to many other video editing program interfaces, such as iMovies for Macintosh.

The center of the screen in Figure 1 features a running draft of the video project—a close-up of the particular clip that the user works on at any given moment. This focal window highlights one clip at a time, selected by the user from the clips available along the bottom of the screen. Along the bottom of the screen are the multiple clips that make up the actual draft or running version of the final video project, laid out in a chronological ordering of clips as the user sees fit. The user can move clips into and out of the working draft with the use of the clipboard. The clipboard, located on the right-hand side of the screen, displays the available clips. The user imports these clips, which can either be still images or video, from any digital source of his or her choice, including a video camera or a location saved on the computer’s hard drive. As users construct a movie project, they move clips back and forth between the clipboard and their movie. The program also allows users to manipulate images, import audio tracks and correlate them with the video images (the students imported audio narration, which they wrote and then recorded), as well as graphic and title slides.

Once the digital video of their performance had been imported, their first job was to edit this video by dividing it into clips, cutting out unwanted pieces, and arranging the clips. This activity was quite new and engaging to the students. Another positive aspect of this video editing feature, according to the students, was that it had taken the pressure off of their performance, since
the undesirable parts could be edited out at a later time.

After Nicole and Kendra had developed the first chapter of their video project, which featured clips from the performance of their script, they decided, in conversation with Mr. Clark, to develop a second chapter into an exploration of prominent female figures in African American history. Based on what they had learned through their research in books and on the Web, they decided to focus on the lives of Charlayne Hunter-Gault, the first African American woman to graduate from the University of Georgia in 1963, who later went on to become a prominent journalist; Fannie Lou Hamer, a civil rights activist and promoter of voting rights for African Americans; and Coretta Scott King, notable civil rights leader and wife of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

After searching the school library for information on these individuals, Nicole and Kendra returned to Web-based research. As before, they conducted Google searches and evaluated several Web sites for usable information for the audio track for this chapter of their documentary. They visited Web sites such as Encyclopædia Britannica (http://www.britannica.com), NPR (http://www.npr.org), and CNN.com (http://www.cnn.com) while also reading online, taking notes, and printing selected documents for later study. They decided that they might have a clearer idea of how to use their notes to construct a narrative for their movie if they began working with images, so that they could see what their narration would accompany. In a recursive way, Nicole and Kendra went back to their work with images. During this phase of their project, rather than recording themselves to represent their subject, they searched for images of Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Coretta Scott King on the Web.

As they searched Web sites for images, they again took nonlinear pathways through sites and evaluated the images in much the same way as they had the textual information they were seeking earlier in the project. They began with Google searches, then looked at various sites with the sole purpose of finding the variety and type of images that might fit their forming written narrative that had begun to emerge from their textual research.

As they found images, Kendra and Nicole kept a digital folder into which they put images that made their first cut as possibly usable. They later imported these images into the clipboard of their project in Video Studio Editor. Figure 1 features the students’ work at this stage in the project. In the clipboard along the right-hand side of the screen are several images of Charlayne Hunter-Gault that the students had imported into the program. They were moving images back and forth between the clipboard and the actual working sequence of their documentary in the “reel” along the bottom of the screen.

A big part of their work at this point was to make decisions about the overall sequence and the ordering of each image, which represented a new literacy practice with a highly visual dimension. This visual dimension had its own form of “punctuating,” or framing, that was central to organizing the girls’ literacy and inquiry processes. Gunther Kress (Literacy) theorizes punctuating in visual communication as “the framing of an overall organization, and as the framing of different kinds of order” (125). Their first major framing was the division of their project into two distinct parts, or chapters. As Nicole and Kendra worked with images of King, Hunter-Gault, and Hamer, they developed other levels of framing—for example, subdivisions of chapters—that continued to bring sense to their overall research project and organize their work. The students initially imported all of the images from their digital folder onto the clipboard in random order. Then, they sorted the pictures so that there were subdivisions between each figure and title pages dividing each subsection.

In addition to ordering the images and framing the subsections, the students decided how long each image was to remain on the screen for the viewer. A function of Video Studio Editor allowed the students to enter this length in seconds. By framing their work into subsections and deciding on the length of each image, Kendra and Nicole
had a clear visual representation of the "shape" that their narrative, which was to accompany the images as an audio text, might take. In other words, the emerging visual representation of their project organized their work by helping them judge how much they needed to go back to reading and writing about each of the focal women they were studying. The interface of Video Studio Editor gave the students a window into their subject matter by making visual representations available that significantly ordered their inquiries.

Below is an excerpt from the narrative that Kendra and Nicole wrote to accompany the images in the subsection on Coretta Scott King (which they audio-recorded and imported into their video project). They wrote this narrative after finding and arranging images of Coretta Scott King in Video Studio.

Nicole: What do you think of when you think of the civil rights movement? Rosa Parks, Ruby Bridges, and of course Martin Luther King Jr. But Coretta Scott King was also a famous civil rights activist. Did you know that Coretta Scott King was born on her grandfather's farm in Alabama and in order to get supplies she had to pick cotton?

Kendra: No, I didn't know that.

Nicole: Imagine you are picking cotton to raise money to get supplies—is that crazy or what?

Kendra: I couldn't do that all the time, I'd be too tired... Hey, do you know a famous guy name Martin Luther King Jr.?

Nicole: Yeah.

Kendra: Well, she was married to Martin Luther. They met at New England College in Boston... Did you know that Coretta worked alongside her husband? She became nationally known for her work. Can you do all those things Coretta Scott King did for us?

Nicole: I can if I try.

Concluding Thoughts

Kendra and Nicole used the video production process to explore a new set of representations to organize, understand, and interact with their subject matter. Perhaps most striking about the new view offered by video production was that it encouraged and allowed the students to explore their topic through representations that cut across multiple modes (visual, audio, gestural/performative, linguistic, and so on), or channels of representation and communication of meaning (New London Group 26). A related concept, multimodality (Kress, "Multimodality"), refers to the potential for meaning making to use multiple communication modes. These concepts are relevant for describing Kendra and Nicole's research and video production processes because they bring to light the intricacies of how video production changed their research and literacy processes during this project. In particular, the visual mode took on an organizing, leading role in the students' research processes. All of the work they did in the performative and linguistic modes was in anticipation or dialogue with the visual side of their work. For example, their initial research and writing of a script was done in preparation for recording and importing their script into Video Studio Editor. Later in their project, the students' work with images of Fannie Lou Hamer, Coretta Scott King, and Charlayne Hunter-Gault provided them with a framework for going back to their text-based research to produce a narrative to accompany the work they had done with these images.

In addition, the students' anticipated work in the visual mode often gave them a clear purpose for continuing their research, which included reading and writing. There was a recursive relationship between the linguistic and visual modes as the students moved between visual and textual work. As the students moved back and forth in this way, they transformed their representations and ideas across modes. The students often transformed their readings into writing by writing their script as well as their narratives for their video. In addition, they moved their written meanings into the gestural mode when they performed their script, and then into the visual mode through their video recording of their performance. They also shifted their written meanings into the audio mode through audio-recording their narrative to accompany their images of prominent African American women. This audio track was then imported into the video program and integrated with their work in the visual mode.
Theorists of new literacies (Snyder) note that, with the rise of digital technologies, literacy practices are increasingly multimodal, taking place on the screen rather than on the page, in contrast to the print-centered literacy practices traditionally valued at school. Kress, for example, highlights "the broad move from the now centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image and, on the other hand, the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the medium of the screen. These two together are producing a revolution in the uses and effects of literacy and of associated means for representing and communicating at every level and in every domain" (Literacy 1).

If Kress's observations and those of other theorists of new literacies (New London Group) are right, video projects can provide students with opportunities to work across modes in ways that are in sync with the increasingly digitized and multimodal ways in which literacy will be done in this new media age. Nicole and Kendra's project provides an example of how this might look in the classroom and how the synergy between text and image can create new possibilities for literacy and inquiry learning.

Works Cited

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READWITETHINK CONNECTION

LISA STORM FINK, RWT

Ranker examines the use of digital video projects as students share their knowledge through performance. "Campaigning for Fair Use: Public Service Announcements on Copyright Awareness" invites students to record public service announcements (PSAs). Students explore a range of resources on fair use and copyright and then design PSAs for broadcast over the school's public address system. Work can also be published as podcasts on the Internet. Students tap research and persuasive writing strategies as they design announcements for an audience of their peers. These experiences often inspire students to demonstrate their knowledge more creatively than with traditional assignments. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=939

EJ 20 Years Ago

Use the Media Dazzle-Dust We Have

Seventeenth century Londoners were entertained by Will's troupe in the Globe. Today, people are mesmerized by TV. If we can use this dazzle-dust to accomplish our goals in education, we'd be foolish not to take full advantage of it.