Making meaning on the screen: Digital video production about the Dominican Republic

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Digital video production can help students explore topics “multimodally” while enhancing the reading, writing, and discussion processes that would normally be part of a traditional inquiry project.

It is no longer possible to think about literacy in isolation from a vast array of social, technological and economic factors.... These are, on the one hand, 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 screen. (Kress, 2003, p. 1)

In the midst of the changes in literacy that Kress (2003) described, literacy researchers have been considering how digital media (the World Wide Web, e-mail, video, instant messaging) are changing the nature of literacy practices (Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Luke & Elkins, 1998; Snyder, 1998). For example, instant messaging and e-mail have created new ways of using writing to communicate; these new uses have, in turn, shaped new types of social interactions. As another example, reading on the Web not only involves print but also images and sound. Digital media have created new types of reading practices. In the midst of the migration of literacy practices to digital media and the rise of images (in relation to texts), literacy researchers have raised questions about the role of the school in helping students to become part of this changing world of communication that is taking place (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; New London Group, 2000).

In this article, I explore one way that teachers can help students to develop new literacies: by using digital video production in conjunction with student inquiry projects. The use of digital video production in educational settings is a growing area of interest for literacy educators. Researchers have focused on how digital video production enables storytelling in multiple modes (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Waire, 2006), and how students form a concept of audience (Buckingham & Harvey, 2001) for the texts they author. The use of digital video in school-based curricula also has overlaps with approaches such as media literacy (Beach, 2007; Luke, 1999) and media education (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994), which involve students in both reading and producing popular media texts. In the pages that follow, I build upon this work by offering an illustrative case study of the research processes of two 12-year-old students, William and Alex (all names are pseudonyms), as they worked on an inquiry project about the Dominican Republic and produced a digital documentary video based upon what they learned. By reading about Alex and William’s literacy work, teachers who wish to try video projects in their own classrooms might use this article as a frame of reference for delving into this largely uncharted curricular territory.
As Alex and William researched and produced their documentary on the Dominican Republic, they used two digital media: (1) the Web (as they conducted research for texts and images) and (2) digital video-production software (Video Studio Editor 8 for the PC). They also used more traditional inquiry methods such as notebook writing and book reading. Over the course of the project, they narrowed their study of the Dominican Republic to focus on baseball players with familial ties to the Dominican Republic (who play on U.S. teams) and music of the Dominican Republic.

Alex and William used both texts and images extensively throughout the project. Through their video production process, they searched for visual images of various aspects of the Dominican Republic on the Web, selected and saved these images for later use, and then imported and arranged the images in Video Studio Editor. Video Studio allowed the boys to weave these images together with audio tracks (which they wrote and narrated) into a single, polished movie project. In the process of producing these audio tracks, the boys conducted Web searches on their topics by selecting, reading, and organizing the information that they found. They used this information to write their narratives in their writing notebook and then later recorded and imported these narratives into their movie project.

The boys’ video production process served as an organizing, integrative center for their research about the Dominican Republic. Their work on the computer in Video Studio drove their inquiry processes in other modes and media (webpages, writing, audio). As Alex and William used the video production process to organize and understand their subject matter, they explored the Dominican Republic “multimodally”—through multiple representational modes (visual, audio, linguistic; Kress, 2000). The concept of multimodality—or the idea that meaning can be represented and communicated through multiple channels—has drawn increasing attention from literacy scholars in recent years (Kress, 2003; Siegel, 2006). This area of study is important because it recognizes that the linguistic mode (although the most heavily favored mode at school) is not the only mode available for communicating and exploring meanings. Recognizing the potential of multiple modes of communication in literacy curricula is important because students benefit from exploring the full spectrum of meaning-making possibilities. In addition, including multiple modes of meaning making in the curriculum promises to bring school-based literacy curricula “in sync” with the changes in public communication that surround the school in the broader society.

Background

As a former teacher and current professor with interests in and experiences with new literacies, I teamed up with a colleague of mine—a teacher who was also interested in using video production as part of student inquiry projects. Mr. Clark and I collaborated in designing a project that resulted in student-produced documentary videos about topics of interest to the students. I worked with Mr. Clark and the students on this video project over the course of seven months (one to two days each week). Using qualitative case-study methods and principles (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Merriam, 1998), I closely studied the students’ literacy processes as they worked collaboratively while reading, writing, and producing their video at the computer. Although my primary responsibility was for gathering data, I also participated in the research by helping Mr. Clark plan the project and helping the students with their work along the way.

Alex and William met daily with Mr. Clark and six other students for their English/language arts block. This group of students was designated as struggling with academic literacy performance in relation to their peers (according to test scores and grade-level standards). Mr. Clark and I decided that the students needed engaging, motivat-
ing, 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, 2000). During the project, the students paired up and chose topics of interest, including the Dominican Republic, African American History, electricity, World War II, and Jamaica. In order to get a close look at the intricacies of using video as part of student research, I’ll focus specifically on William and Alex’s project.

In the following two sections, I describe Alex and William’s research and digital literacy practices through two main phases of their project as it developed over the course of seven months. The first section describes the first phase of their work as they built up a knowledge base about their topic and decided on focal subtopics through both book and Web-based research. The second section describes the next phase of Alex and William’s work as they began to design their project in Video Studio Editor. During this phase, they worked side by side at the computer while continuing and refining their research based upon their emerging video project.

Charting a pathway: Researching the Dominican Republic on the page and on the screen

Mr. Clark began the project by introducing the group to the idea of making a documentary video and asking the students to choose three potential inquiry topics. Through conferences with each pair of students, he helped them to settle on a single topic. Because William’s family had moved from the Dominican Republic when he was a young child, he had an evident passion for and base of knowledge about the topic that eventually led to his and Alex’s choice of the Dominican Republic as their inquiry topic.

Figure 1 is a reproduction of the first page of the research notebook that William and Alex kept over the course of their research project on the Dominican Republic. At the top of the figure, they listed their three potential research topics (the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, and video games). At the bottom of Figure 1 is a brainstorming list of possible subtopics or headings for the different chapters of their eventual video (food, history, flag, people, video games, dancing, languages, school, land, animals, games, movies, customs). This list was heavily influenced by the first phase of their research project, during which the boys were engaged in research using books about the Dominican Republic that they had checked out from their school library. Many of the headings in these books and the aspects of the Dominican Republic that the book authors chose to focus on (geography, tourist sites, history, food) mirrored the boys’ brainstorming list in Figure 1.

During this phase of the project, Mr. Clark also scaffolded the students’ inquiry processes by helping them to develop research questions (as a way of driving their inquiries forward). In addition, as the students came into contact with more and more information, Mr. Clark developed a series of lessons on note taking, reading nonfiction texts strategically, and evaluating the quality and usefulness of information.

Mr. Clark’s lessons on note taking and sifting through factual information proved useful when the boys began to conduct Web searches on the contemporary musical culture of the Dominican Republic. (As was seen in Figure 1, the boys had expressed an early interest in dance, which led to their interest in the music of the Dominican Republic.) None of the books that they had checked out from the library, however, had contemporary information about these topics, so the Web proved useful to them in this respect. (William was familiar with bachata and merengue music because he and his family listened to it at home.) Mr. Clark and I suggested...
that the boys conduct Web searches to look for contemporary information about bachata and other forms of music and dance from the Dominican Republic.

The boys’ initial Web search using the terms *Dominican Republic music* led them to multiple websites. From their online reading of these sites, they learned more about bachata and merengue and found out about several other types of music (often closely related to dance cultures as well) currently popular in the Dominican Republic, including salve, gagá, merenrap, reggaetón, and Dominican rock. The boys also printed these introductory articles out and included them in their research folder for further reading and note taking.

Over the course of the next few class sessions dedicated to the project, Alex and William specified their searches based upon what they had found initially. As a result of their discussions while performing their initial searches, William’s background knowledge, and their online reading, the boys decided to focus on merengue and bachata for their more in-depth searches. For example, their search of several websites yielded much information on bachata, including its history and origins and information about famous bachata musicians such as Joe
Veras, Aventura, El Chaval de la Bachata, and Monchy y Alexandra.

These Web searches involved new reading practices that differed qualitatively from their usual book-based research. Their reading paths (typical of Web-based, on screen reading) were far from linear (following a clear path from beginning to end as in the reading of many print texts). Instead, their reading took nonlinear pathways such as reading selectively, taking links as needed, reading only the necessary parts of webpages, and returning to their search results in search of other pages.

As they moved back and forth from the www.google.com search results page and the actual webpages, William and Alex evaluated their content (in conversations with me and Mr. Clark) for potential usefulness. As they became more familiar with their topics, they became more discriminatory about which pages to spend time with and which ones to cast aside in search of another. For example, many of the webpages were unhelpful and were skipped over fairly quickly. Some pages provided information that could be accessed through quick online reading while others needed to be printed out and put in their research folders for reading at a later time.

Sometimes, the boys took note of findings and explored them in more depth later. For example, during a search using the term famous merengue singers, the boys turned up a website that featured famous Dominicans in other fields. They found out from this site that there were a large number of professional baseball players on U.S. teams from the Dominican Republic. Although they did not explore this topic until later in the project, it eventually ended up comprising the second chapter of their video.

Alex and William spent extended periods of time reading the articles that they had printed out during their Web searches. They took notes, highlighted, underlined, and discussed their ongoing findings with each other, Mr. Clark, and myself. Oftentimes, their discussions centered on the potential usefulness of the articles for providing information that they might use when writing their narratives for their video. At other times, these reading sessions resembled reading conferences during which we read and discussed the articles with the students to ensure that they comprehended their reading. For example, the following excerpt is from a class session during which William and I were reading an article about the Premio Lo Nuestro Latin Music Awards that was printed from www.dominicantoday.com. This article featured an update on the nominations for the awards.

Jason: This looks like it’s from a newspaper called Dominican Today. (William and I were both reading the article silently. In the opening paragraphs, I noted that the popular recording artist Shakira is listed as a nominee.) Do you know Shakira?

William: Yeah, I know Shakira. I don’t know how to explain, but I like it. It’s pretty good.

Jason: So all of these people were nominated. Do you know what that means?

William: Um...like picked?

Jason: Yeah. And then they vote on the people who were picked.

At a later point during this phase of the research, Alex and William decided that a listing of the different types of music from the Dominican Republic, their characteristics, key musicians, and the instruments commonly used would be useful for their work. Figure 2 is an excerpt from their notes at this point, which they kept in their research notebook.

As Alex and William read through their printouts on these topics and took notes such as those featured in Figure 2, they discussed the types of music in a way that laid the foundation for their later writing about the topic. The following excerpt is from one such event. During this
conversation, William and Alex were reading in depth about reggaetón. As they read, a classmate, Tony (who was a fan of reggaetón and reggae music) chimed in:

Alex: Do you know reggaetón?
William: Yeah. Do you know Daddy Yankee?
Mr. Clark: Is it a style of music?
William: Yeah, it’s a style of music. They rap.

Tony: Reggaetón? It’s like reggae but it’s a rap.

About halfway through their reading of their printouts about Dominican music, Alex and William began working independently by dividing their research processes more clearly than they had before. Because of William’s intense interest in Dominican music, he continued to work on that aspect of the project by taking notes that he would eventually synthesize into an informational audio
Imagine yourself relaxing at the beach of the Dominican Republic hearing some beautiful music, the waves crashing down, and the birds chirping. I’m hearing a beautiful song on stage. Everybody screams! There are two different kinds of music: bachata and merengue. Bachata is smooth and soft but not fast. They use the guitar, bongos, and maracas. Merengue is fast—not very slow like bachata. In merengue they use the drums, marimba, and a metal scraper. The best music in the Dominican Republic is merengue. It is heard all around the Dominican Republic. In bachata there are maybe 5 to 4 people. In merengue there are maybe 10 to 5 people.

While William was busy writing the featured narrative, Alex had returned to the computers—this time conducting image searches on the Web using the list of baseball players that the boys had found earlier (while searching for famous musicians from the Dominican Republic). Based upon his initial list, he searched for images of David Ortiz, Alex Rodriguez, Sammy Sosa, and Pedro Martinez. As he found images of these baseball players that he thought might be useful, he saved them in a folder on the computer’s desktop, later consulting with William about which images they should use in their actual video. However, not until they actually began importing and arranging the images in Video Studio Editor did the boys get a clear picture of the shape that their video and the rest of their research project would take. In the next section, I describe this phase of their work.

Working in Video Studio Editor: A dialogue between images and texts

Because this section focuses on William and Alex’s work in Video Studio Editor 8, I’ll begin with an explanation of the software interface (means of operating, functions, and overall format) as a way of outlining the options for manipulating images and information that it created for the students. Figure 3 is a “screen shot” (a photograph of the computer screen) of the students’ work at one point in the project. It provides an illustration of the program’s functions, which are similar to many other video-editing program interfaces (such as iMovie on the Macintosh).

The center of the screen in Figure 3 features a running draft of the video project—a close up of the particular clip that the user is working on at any given moment (at this point the title slide is featured). This focal window highlights one clip at a time, selected by the user from the clips available along the bottom of the screen. These multiple clips make up the actual draft or running version of the final video project, which are 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 of the movie 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 their choosing (including a video camera or other location saved on the computer’s hard drive). As users construct a movie project, they move clips back and forth from the clipboard and into their movie as it takes shape over time. The program also allows users to manipulate images as they see fit and import audio tracks, correlating them with the video images (the students imported audio narration, which they wrote and then recorded) as well as graphic and title slides.

About the same time that William completed his narrative about Dominican music, Alex had gathered a sufficient number of images of the baseball players that the boys had decided to focus on in their project. At this juncture, they rejoined their efforts as they began to work in Video Studio Editor. Their first job was to begin a new video project, meanwhile selecting and importing images of the baseball players onto their clipboard (from their folder saved on the computer’s hard drive).
Once the images were on the clipboard, Alex and William selected and moved images, inserting and arranging them sequentially onto the “timeline” (which made them part of the running draft of their movie). Their work at this point was entirely visual because they hadn’t yet conducted text-based research on these baseball players. Because the images were randomly imported onto the clipboard, they first needed to group all of the images of David Ortiz together, all of the images for Alex Rodriguez together, and so on. These divisions, in effect, created their first sub-chapters within this first chapter to be realized in Video Editor. (Although they had researched and written about Dominican music, they had not yet done anything in Video Studio with this material, which would later become their second chapter.)

As the boys began to import and arrange the baseball player images into Video Studio Editor, their project began to take form and they could conceptualize the scope of their video (what was possible to actually fit in the video of a reasonable and doable length) and then focus their energies toward accomplishing their goals. Up to this point, Alex and William had still been thinking that they might include chapters about some of the initial topics that they had brainstormed (such as history, geography, places to visit). As they began to physically lay out the images in their video and see the length of time that it would take to accomplish what they were envisioning, they cut these other topics and decided to divide their movie into two major chapters. As was evident in this highly visual phase of Alex and William’s work on their project, the visual
mode has its own form of “punctuating” or “framing” that was central to organizing the boys’ literacy and inquiry processes. Kress (2003) theorized punctuating in visual communication as “the framing of an overall organization, and as the framing of different kinds of order” (p. 125).

As a result of their framing work with images, they decided that chapter 1 was to be on the baseball players (with subchapters on David Ortiz, Alex Rodriguez, Sammy Sosa, and Pedro Martinez), and chapter 2 was dedicated to music (with subchapters on bachata and merengue). The following is an excerpt from the boys’ conversation as they arranged and discussed their project.

Alex: Can I fix that? (referring to the arrangement of text over an image)

William: We have to take this guy out. He’s not a sports player. (referring to an image of Christopher Columbus)

Mr. Clark: I thought you were going to tell how he sailed to the Dominican Republic?

William: Yeah, but this is by the sports players.

Mr. Clark: So he’s just in a different part? He’s in a different chapter? Maybe you could drag him back up here to the clipboard.

William: We don’t have time because we still have to do bachata and merengue.

Alex: Yeah, let’s just take that part out. We don’t have enough time. But maybe we can put it back in later.

Within each subdivision on the individual baseball players, the boys arranged the images further, inserting titles, determining how long each image was to be displayed, and creating transition effects between images. At this point, they had the images imported and arranged for their baseball chapter but had not done research or written their narrative, and they had done the text-based research and writing for their chapter on Dominican music but hadn’t found the images. So Alex began searching webpages for textual information on the baseball players while William began a new chapter in Video Studio on music from the Dominican Republic (see Figure 4). He created a title slide for this chapter and began an image search on this topic as Alex had done with the baseball players.

Based upon this research and note taking, Alex wrote a narrative to accompany each of the subsections on the famous Dominican baseball players (as William had done for bachata and merengue music). The following is the beginning of William’s narrative on Alex Rodriguez:

“Arad [A-Rod] (a.k.a Alex Rodriguez)”

Alex played for the Yankees. He was born July 27, 1975 in New York. Alex was a shortstop. Alex’s first team was the Seattle Mariners. His second team was the Texas Rangers. On November 17, 2003, Alex won a player reward. But it went to someone else. Alex first moved to Miami, FL. Alex was a good baseball player at Miami at West Minister high school and he was rewarded.

During this phase of their research, the ways in which the boys’ emerging video production process created a dialogue between texts and images really came into view. In other words, their work with texts created the need for further work with images and vice versa. Thus, a truly multimodal research process began to emerge (especially as they recorded and imported their written narratives through the audio mode).

Deciding how to use and integrate the audio mode required problem solving and discussion with Mr. Clark and between Alex and William about how they wanted to form their project and about the possibilities and constraints of the media with which they were working. For example, as William was searching the Web for images that
might fit with their chapter on Dominican music, Alex was on the computer next to him searching for webpages with textual information about the focal baseball players. The following excerpt is a stretch of dialogue from their conversation as they conducted these Web searches:

William: Mr. Clark, do you think that we have enough pictures of the music?
Mr. Clark: Why don’t you insert your pictures into the timeline and then you can see if you have enough or what you might need. Also, how are you going to get your writing in there?

William: What do you mean?
Mr. Clark: I mean are you going to videotape yourself talking? Or will you just do voice or type it in?
Alex: I think we can have half the TV with our face. And then we shift and another picture pops up.
Mr. Clark: I’m not sure it’s possible to split the screen like that. Well, let’s just start with putting your pictures in your timeline and see what happens from there.

Through conversations such as these, the boys decided that they would record and import their audio tracks so that they would play simul-
Implications for teaching

Alex and William’s work with digital literacies and other inquiry processes raises several points relevant to literacy teaching that incorporates digital video production. The first implication has to do with what was new and creative about Alex and William’s experiences with digital technologies in the curriculum. Not all uses of digital technology necessarily bring something new to the literacy curriculum. Just like any other curricular component, digital technologies can be used in limiting and uncreative ways (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). It is in the quality of uses of digital technologies that create the potential for something new to happen (Sefton-Green, 1999),

Figure 5
Close-up of multiple tracks or modes available in Video Studio
allowing for a new meaning-making process to emerge rather than acting as an addendum.

So what was new and creative about Alex and William’s uses of digital technology? How can teachers learn from their experiences? Kress (2003) offered insights on these questions by noting that “much of what we regard as ‘creativity’ happens as students move meanings across modes” (p. 36). As was discussed and highlighted in this article, the students’ explored their meanings multimodally as they moved across audio, linguistic, and visual modes of communication. This aspect of their literacy processes enhanced and built upon the reading, writing, and discussion processes that students would normally be engaged in as part of a traditional inquiry project.

The new medium (digital video) structured a dialogic relationship between text and image. This relationship was created by an interactive synergy between the boys’ Web image searches, work in Video Studio Editor, Web text searches, and the writing of narratives—thus producing a multimodal means of generating knowledge about the Dominican Republic.

As the boys moved back and forth between work with images and texts, they transformed their meanings of the Dominican Republic over time. At times, their work with images served as the context for further work with text. At other times, their work with text served as the context for further meaning to be made with images. For example, when they had arranged their chapter on famous Dominican baseball players in Video Studio, they realized that they needed information about these baseball players so that they could write a narrative to accompany them. Conversely, once they had written their narrative on contemporary Dominican music (based upon their Web-based research on the topic) they realized that they needed to conduct image searches for representations of Dominican music in order to import images to accompany their audio track. Their uses of Video Studio Editor were unique because they created a mode of production that generated itself over the course of the project and creatively structured the boys’ purposes and interactions with their subject matter.

For William in particular, working with subject matter that was part of his cultural identity was an important element of this project. As several literacy scholars have noted (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Moll & González, 1994), allowing students to draw upon familiar subjects and other funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) in school is an effective way of creating cultural relevance for students. Particularly for students from nondominant cultural and linguistic backgrounds, cultural relevance creates new means of access to school-based curricula and literacy practices. In addition, the boys’ use of the Web allowed them to use their knowledge and interests in popular culture of the Dominican Republic (contemporary musical culture and professional baseball players) as a way of entering into the literacy practices at school. As another way of creating access for marginalized students, literacy scholars have noted the importance of popular culture as a way of “widening the circle” of what counts as legitimate material for exploration at school (Newkirk, 2002, pp. 170–171), thus creating a “permeable curriculum” (Dyson, 1993, p. 217) in which home-based and school-based knowledge and literacies can intermingle.

There are a few logistic matters, however, that go along with a digital video project such as the one I described in this article. First, the fact that we used Video Studio Editor 8 was relatively unimportant. This program happened to be part of the video package that was available on the computers in Mr. Clark’s classroom. There are a wide variety of similar programs (Movie Maker for PCs, iMovie for the Macintosh) that use a similar interface and underlying logic. Any such program (that is often included as part of the software packages that come with computers) would serve a similar purpose. For teachers who may be deterred by the technical aspects of such a project, I should note that Mr. Clark and I learned a lot about using Video Studio Editor along the way. We didn’t come to the project as
experts in using this particular program. Technological expertise had little to do with what enabled the students to explore new, digital literacies during this project. In fact, learning how to use the technologies was part of the inquiry itself.

REFERENCES