

# WHAT WORKS?

## *Research into Practice*

A research-into-practice series produced by a partnership between the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and the Ontario Association of Deans of Education

### Research Monograph # 39

How can teachers address the new forms of digital literacy and still maintain a strong focus on basic reading and writing skills?

## The Student Filmmaker

### Enhancing Literacy Skills through Digital Video Production

by Dr. David Hutchison  
Brock University

Increasingly, teachers are being asked to address an ever-broader notion of literacy – one that includes new forms of digital literacy, related to the multimedia technologies students routinely interact with (e.g., blogs, wikis<sup>1</sup> and social networking websites). Yet how can teachers integrate digital literacy with the Ontario curriculum which underscores the importance of traditional forms of print and oral literacy? Student-created videos are one possibility that affords an opportunity to integrate print, oral, and digital literacies into a compelling curriculum unit.

### The 21st Century Literacy Challenge

During their out-of-school lives, students routinely interact with complex forms of online and digital media. These multimodal communication technologies (such as texting and YouTube® videos) go well beyond the printed word. They entail new forms of social discourse, in which the production of knowledge and the negotiation of meaning are interwoven with forms of literacy that eschew the linearity of traditional texts.<sup>2</sup> By its very nature, online media incorporates hyperlinks, dynamic text, images, sounds and repurposed media (e.g., video mash-ups) with the fixed, written word. As young people engage with the new media, they become embedded in what Henry Jenkins describes as a participatory culture.<sup>3</sup> Through this interaction, they continually remake their social universe, producing new knowledge with others in a collaborative and dialectical way.

#### Research Tells Us

Students draw on and strengthen their print based literacy skills when they engage in well-planned and coordinated video production projects.

#### Reported benefits:

- strengthened curricular connections
- increased student motivation
- improved student learning

#### Associated challenges:

- managing video production equipment
- coordinating logistics
- working within time constraints

**DAVID HUTCHISON** PhD, is Professor and Chair of the Department of Teacher Education at Brock University. He is the author of *Playing to Learn: Video Games in the Classroom* and co-author, with Ian Wright, of *Elementary Social Studies: A Practical Approach to Teaching and Learning*.

The Student Achievement Division is committed to providing teachers with current research on instruction and learning. The opinions and conclusions contained in these monographs are, however, those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies, views, or directions of the Ontario Ministry of Education or the Student Achievement Division.

## Taking Advantage of the Possibilities

Researchers who study how children mediate the new literacies are investigating teaching practices that take advantage of the possibilities afforded by the new technologies. A recent U.S. study, for example, explored the use of video production as an instructional strategy in K–12 schools.<sup>4</sup> Benefits reported by teachers include strengthened curricular connections, improved student learning and increased student motivation and engagement. Teachers also noted the challenges associated with managing video production equipment, coordinating the logistics of ambitious video production projects and working within time constraints.

At first glance, handing students a video camera might seem to favour digital literacy at the expense of more traditional forms of print literacy; yet students who engage in well-planned and coordinated video production projects draw upon and strengthen their print-based writing skills, while simultaneously developing digital literacy skills.<sup>5</sup> And the research shows that students do so in a purposeful and motivated way that generates genuine excitement for learning.<sup>6</sup>

Jason Ohler, a researcher who has studied how teachers tap into students' "digital stories" in schools, emphasizes the importance of pre-writing and storyboards in helping students to craft a video production.<sup>7</sup> As students' stories are recalled, they must be planned on paper before they are captured on digital video. Teachers play a critical role in the process, setting clear expectations for the written works students create in preparation for and following a video shoot. Ohler notes:

"Writing is key. Even though students' final products are media-based, the most important tool used in the creation of a digital story is writing scripts and story treatments. The saying 'If it ain't on the page, then it ain't on the stage' is as true for digital storytelling as it is for productions on Broadway." (p. 46)

### The Six Stages of Video Production

All but the most modest of video production projects move through six stages.<sup>16</sup> Smaller projects may move quickly but larger projects will likely require a commitment of several weeks or even months.

**1. Preparation and exploration.** Students familiarize themselves with the stages of video production, video production roles and video techniques, hardware and software. They prepare:

- a job description for various production roles (e.g., director, script writer, set designer, camera operator, actor and editor)
- a categorized inventory list for the equipment they will use
- an instructional guide for using the camera

**2. Development.** Students choose an idea for their video, research the topic, prepare a pitch for the teacher and/or class and write a treatment and/or script. They prepare:

- a word web in which the ideas for a video are brainstormed
- a treatment (i.e., synopsis) for a video
- a research report, summarizing and synthesizing relevant information

**3. Pre-production.** Students create storyboards for each scene, work out the logistics for filming (e.g., budget and location shooting) and create any needed sets, props and costumes. They prepare:

- a timeline which lays out the production schedule
- a storyboard which graphically sequences the shots
- a dialog interchange comprising a conversation between two or more characters

### The Filmmaker's Toolkit

Students can begin producing videos as soon as they have access to a cell phone for capturing video footage and a computer for editing it. Over time, a school can invest in the following hardware and software:

- a digital video camera for capturing video footage, photographing still images, and recording audio
- a tripod for holding the camera steady
- a computer for editing the footage
- a video editing software application for editing the footage and producing the final video production (e.g., iMovie or Windows Live Movie Maker, available free-of-charge from Apple and Microsoft, respectively)

A basic video production toolkit can be augmented with:

- a MIDI keyboard
- music composition software
- a microphone for recording narration
- a DVD-R burner for creating DVD-Video disks
- a collection of royalty-free images and music (such as those found at commons.wikimedia.org) which will in turn provide teachers with an opportunity to discuss issues related to copyright

Drawing on Alan Davis's definition,<sup>8</sup> Ohler describes these digital stories as short, personal narratives that draw on students' direct and lived experiences. The emphasis on short videos is deliberate. Digital stories and public service announcements are much more manageable than longer, more ambitious projects.

### Meeting Boys' Literacy Needs

The Ontario Ministry of Education has identified classroom-based video productions as one of several strategies teachers can employ to address the unique literacy needs of boys.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, research has shown that struggling male readers can benefit from the opportunity to create videos in schools.

Over a year-long period, David L. Bruce tracked the literacy strategies that four low-achieving male high school students used while creating and interpreting music videos.<sup>10</sup> Recognizing that these students experienced difficulty deciphering meaning from traditional forms of prose, Bruce included song lyrics and graphic organizers, such as storyboards and shot lists, among the texts he asked students to create and/or reflect meaningfully on. Bruce's research highlights the critical literacy skills the four low-achieving students employed as they worked together to draft the shot list for the music video, critically reflect on the captured footage and re-sequence the clips into a final video production.

The success the students experienced with their video production provided Bruce with a meaningful pathway for engaging the students in informal discussions about traditional writing conventions. As they segued from working on their videos to writing more traditional texts, Bruce encouraged the students to apply the convention of "transitions" from the world of video composition to the world of print composition.

## Video Production Genres

Students can create a wide variety of video productions, ranging from short one-minute public service announcements (an excellent choice as a first project) to full-length fictional movies. Popular choices for student video productions include:

- documentaries
- interviews/talk shows
- movie trailers
- music videos
- nature films
- newscasts
- school plays
- time-lapsed videos
- training films
- variety shows

#### 4. Production. Students capture and log the video and audio footage for the video.

They prepare:

- a log, cataloguing the video footage
- a reflection on each day's filming
- a to-do list for the next day

#### 5. Post-production. Students sequence and edit the captured footage, adding scene transitions, voiceovers, sound effects, and opening and closing credits.

Test screenings with peers may also be conducted. Students prepare:

- sub-titles for the hearing impaired
- the text for the voiceovers and opening/end credits
- a text-based screening survey

#### 6. Marketing and distribution. Students prepare an advertising campaign for their finished video and arrange for its distribution (e.g., DVD and/or online posting). They prepare:

- a press release
- a poster advertising the video
- a proposal ("pitch") for a sequel to the video



## Learn More about LNS Resources ...

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/publications.html>

Call:  
416-325-2929  
1-800-387-5514

Email:  
LNS@ontario.ca

## Recommendations for Classroom Practice

An increasing number of teachers, eager to embrace digital forms of literacy, are incorporating student video productions into the instructional program and across a wide range of subject areas.<sup>11</sup> In Ontario classrooms, for example, Grade 7 students in the Grand Erie District recently created stop-motion videos using claymation and LEGO,<sup>12</sup> while Grade 5 students in the Thames Valley District produced videos warning about the dangers of cyberbullying.<sup>13</sup>

Classroom-based video productions need not be reserved for the intermediate and secondary grades. Researcher Rowena Watts notes that integrating student-created video productions into the primary curriculum can serve as a creative and engaging strategy for teaching reading.<sup>14</sup> Her research highlights a curriculum unit in which a class of six- and seven-year-old students studied a short video, viewed in class, as a form of text – complete with setting, character, and plot development – prior to making their own videos.

The students created artwork backdrops, which they then videotaped and narrated in order to tell their stories. Traditional forms of print literacy were incorporated into the video production process, as the young students wrote captions for their backdrops and annotated them with labels that provided directorial cues (e.g., for inserting sound effects).

The video production/print literacy connection is apparent: the stages of video production rely heavily on traditional forms of written literacy, beginning with the brainstorming of ideas for a video, followed by pre-production planning, the writing of a treatment (i.e., synopsis), script writing, and so on. Indeed, reading and writing skills largely “bookend” the specific act of filming, which, for its part, typically draws heavily on students’ developing oral literacy skills.<sup>15</sup>

## In Summary

Incorporating student-created video production into the curriculum not only broadens the notion of what constitutes “literacy” and “texts” in the classroom but also serves to reinforce traditional forms of literacy through the creation of storyboards, scripts, and other print works. Furthermore, the opportunity to create their own videos may generate genuine enthusiasm for learning on the part of students.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, in the projects chronicled by Ohler, Bruce, and Watts, students retained a high degree of ownership, not only of the video production process, but also of the personally meaningful stories the students told through video.

## REFERENCES

1. Richardson, W. (2010). *Blogs, wikis, podcasts, and other powerful web tools for classrooms*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
2. Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2006). *New literacies: Everyday practices and social learning*. New York, NY: Open University Press.
3. Jenkins, H. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.
4. Norton, P., & Hathaway, D. (2010). Video production as an instructional strategy: Content learning and teacher practice. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, 10, 145–166.
5. Greenwood, D. R. (2003). *Action! In the classroom: A guide to student produced digital video in K–12 education*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
6. Minkel, W. (2003). Light! (Digital) Camera! Action! *School Library Journal*, 49, 56–57.
7. Ohler, J. (2005). The world of digital storytelling. *Educational Leadership*, 63, 44–47.
8. Davis, A. (2004). *Co-authoring identity: Digital storytelling in an urban middle school*. THEN: Technology, Humanities, Education, & Narrative. <http://thenjournal.org/feature/61>
9. Ontario Ministry of Education. (2004). *Me read? No way!: A practical guide to improving boys' literacy skills*. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/brochure/meread/meread.pdf>
10. Bruce, D. L. (2008). Visualizing literacy: Building bridges with media. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 24, 264–282.
11. Hofer, M., Owings, K., & Thacker, E. (2010). Digital toolkits for teachers. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 5, 176–183.
12. Grand Erie District School Board – News. <http://www.granderie.ca/Home/BoardNews/tabid/253/NewsId/64/Default.aspx>
13. Thames Valley District School Board – Bonaventure Meadows Public School. <http://www.tvdsb.ca/Bonaventure.cfm>
14. Watts, R. (2007). Harnessing the power of film in the primary classroom. *Literacy*, 41, 102–109.
15. Goodman, S. (2003). *Teaching youth media: A critical guide to literacy, video production & social change*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
16. Theodosakis, N. (2001). *The director in the classroom: How filmmaking inspires learning*. San Diego, CA: Tech4Learning Publishing.