



The Director in the Classroom

Filmmaking as a tool for teaching and learning

This article introduces the idea of using digital video production and filmmaking projects in the classroom and investigates what technical tools are required to begin exploring this exciting new field.

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Issue Date: Tech Tools Article January 2002

Word Count: 1200

If you scan last weekend's Hollywood box office report (variety.com) you will find the names and rankings of the top grossing films in the United States. Monsters Inc., The Phantom Menace, Shrek, Harry Potter, and other multi-million dollar success stories.

But here's another list of important films produced this last year. My Family's Stories, Choices, My Dog Spot, Interview with a Civil War Soldier. My Family's History. Triangles. Friends.

Though these obscure cinematic experiments may never break box office records, sell buckets of popcorn, or spin off merchandising memorabilia, they are among the most important films being made today. And they are being created by the most influential thinkers of the future, our children.

Welcome to the world of filmmaking in the classroom.

Classrooms are turning into studios, teachers into producers and students into filmmakers.

Inexpensive and easy to use digital cameras and editing software have enabled educators to explore the use of digital video as a serious tool for teaching and learning.

Students of all ages are using DV (Digital Video) cameras and computerized editing software to create video reports in English, Mathematics, History, Science, Languages, Physical Ed, and other subject areas.

The Filmmaking Process in the Classroom

The filmmaking process from initial idea to final presentation is loaded with opportunities and experiences that make it such a powerful and appropriate tool for 21st century classrooms.

Filmmaking begins with an idea. Ideas are then explored and developed. Research is conducted. Oral presentations are pitched. Scripts are written. Storyboards (comic-book like visualizations) are created. Shot Lists are detailed and planning, planning, planning ensues. Cameras finally roll. Editing begins (analysis-synthesis-presentation) and finally the finished videos are presented in the classroom and beyond.



Filmmaking develops visual literacy.

- It fosters research, organization, planning, analysis, and synthesis skills.
- It develops oral, visual and writing presentation skills.
- It develop negotiating, communication and other interpersonal skills
- It creates awareness of community, family and self.
- It creates connections between curriculum and the world outside the classroom.
- It is a rich method to explore content and surround the project with authentic experiences.

Check out thedirectorintheclassroom.com for a detailed article on the connection between the individual steps of the filmmaking process and how skills are developed at every stage.

Equipment

Digital Video Cameras

To begin exploring filmmaking in the classroom you will require a video camera and editing software. I recommend these four features when looking for a DV camera.

- 1) Flip out viewfinder
- 2) Audio/ Video Input
- 3) External Microphone Input
- 4) Pricing less than \$1000.

Flip Out Side Screen

What I love about the flip out side LCD (Liquid Crystal Display) screens is that it allows students to keep one eye on their image and one eye on their environment. It allows them to move with the camera, to follow the action, and to experiment on their feet where they think the camera might or should be.

Audio/Video Input

This feature enables you to import analog video (VHS, 3/4", BETA, Hi8, 8mm) into the camera and create a digital video copy. For schools that have AV rooms filled with these "old" technologies, this creates two important opportunities. First, students are able to incorporate existing analog videotape into the editing design. Second, these vintage VHS and Hi 8 video cameras need not be disposed of. They can be utilized as cameras and then their analog footage can be transferred into the digital world.

External Microphone Input

One of the best ways to ensure clean, crisp sound is to use an external microphone. Although all DV cameras come with a camera-mounted microphone, it is difficult for the camera to record the audio of a subject that is distant from the camera.

Once students begin conducting interviews they will find a desire to improve the quality of their soundtrack. External microphones can be purchased for as little as 30.00 (Radio Shack) and as much as over a thousand dollars for wireless, lapel mounted models. For most classroom applications, the inexpensive wired variety will be a tremendous improvement.

Pricing

Although DV cameras are available above the 1000-dollar range, I recommend the \$600-800 variety. I suggest this for a simple reason: put more cameras into classrooms and allow more students the hands on experience of making movies. The effects that are found in more expensive cameras can, in many cases, be duplicated within the editing software.

Editing

Once the footage is recorded the next step is to begin editing.

The easiest editing software I have used is iMovie by Apple. It's intuitive interface and fast learning



curve allow young students to import their footage, assemble their preferred shots, add narration, sound effects, music, titles and still images and graphics. When completed, students can then export them onto videotape, or present them as a QuickTime movie on a web site, a CD-Rom, or DVD.

For advanced editing, Final Cut Pro (also by Apple) is being used increasingly in Hollywood, and around the world by professional editors of news, documentaries, TV Series, and fiction films; yet, it is also being used by middle school and senior students. Cool!

On the Windows side, editing programs like Adobe Premiere, Videowave, Ulead, Movie works, and DV Studio are among the preferred classroom PC editing programs.

Enhancements

There are many enhancements that can be gradually added to the classroom studio. Here are three things that have the potential to enhance the quality of student productions.

Microphones

As mentioned earlier, external microphones allow students to get the microphone closer to the action and thus produce cleaner sound. Clean audio will greatly improve the overall presentation of the video.

Tripods

I love the portability and freedom that comes with these new small digital video cameras. They enable students to handhold a camera and to move it quickly, responding to cues in their peripheral. There are times, however when there is a desire to create a static shot without the jiggling and wobbling that hands (even experienced hands) give. Tripods range from under one hundred dollars to several hundred dollars.

Lighting

Projects filmed indoors might adequately be illuminated with window light or existing interior lights, but at some point, there may be a need to boost up the lighting. Anything that gives off light can be used. Flood lights, work lights from home renovation centers, household lamps.

Handling lights can be dangerous owing to their fragile nature and to the heat that builds up. So you may want to include the use of lights only after allowing for instructions regarding safe handling precautions.

Assessment

Ultimately, it is not about clear sound, great camerawork, fabulous lighting, or clever editing. What really matters, as in any report, assignment or essay is:

What is this student saying?

Do they understand the subject?

Are they making connections?

Are they asking good questions?

Do they have a point of view?

How clearly are they communicating their ideas?

These questions must remain at the heart of any assessment of digital video projects, otherwise, we risk being beguiled by shiny boxes and smooth as silk software that effortlessly produce professional looking videos.

What must be diligently championed and excavated are the student's story, ideas and points of view.

And you don't need the latest technology to have those.

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BIO

Nikos Theodosakis is a filmmaker, educator and author of the book *The Director In The Classroom: How Filmmaking Inspires Learning*. You will find more information on filmmaking in the classroom as well as links to the resources mentioned in this article at his website thedirectorintheclassroom.com

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