

Digital video in the history classroom: why, how?

Because you can

The production and use of digital video in the history classroom is now much easier and cheaper than it ever has been. Mac users have always benefited from slick editing software, but now all recent Windows PCs come with Microsoft MovieMaker as standard too. This is a wonderfully simple program to use: students will be able to get going after a five minute introduction from the teacher based around a flash tutorial.

Moreover, the cost of the hardware has fallen substantially in recent years. It is now possible to get a well-reviewed digital camcorder from Amazon for little over £100 (the NISIS DV6), and many students will even have a video capture facility on their mobile phone.

Finally, improvements in video compression, memory storage and internet speeds have improved the ease with which digitized films can be shared and accessed. Moviemaker allows you to choose the size of the film created, and a good balance between resolution and size allows for about 150 minutes worth of video to be burned onto one CD or onto a USB memory stick (a 1GB stick retails at about £30, providing 25% more space than a CD) for ease of transfer. Such files can be uploaded to the web and downloaded especially easily with a broadband connection.

Because you should

Digital video as a tool for improving quality of assessment

Digital video helps teachers to improve the quality of their student assessment. For example, role-play activities are fun, but giving a grade to each individual student is difficult when the teacher is busy ensuring the lesson runs smoothly. However, if the lesson is filmed then the teacher can use this as the basis of a much more detailed assessment.

Back in class, such films can be useful for self-assessment too. As Richard Jones-Nerzic, Head of Humanities at the International School of Toulouse (IST) puts it, "On my PGCE course I remember Rob Phillips filming us students as we taught our first dry-run lessons and self-consciously squirming at the sight of myself on screen. But I learnt a lot from it". The same, he argues, is true of students who have an opportunity to review their 'performances'. At the IST, students are filmed delivering classroom presentations to the rest of the group. The raw footage is placed on the school server and each student edits out their own presentation. The class then evaluates each other's presentations and selects the best for inclusion on the departmental website. By the sixth form, this assessment process is much more systematic, with students working through a detailed markscheme including comments about body language, pitch and tone of voice, eye contact and so on.

Digital video as a tool for improving motivation

Traditional paper and pencil assessment do not reward the student whose strengths are kinaesthetic or spatial. However, the filmmaking process touches upon a whole range of learning styles. Depending on the project you might need students to become directors, editors, artists, musicians, cameramen, researchers, scriptwriters or actors.

Moreover, the knowledge that the final produce will be visible to the whole school community or even on the world wide web encourages each student to take the exercise seriously. When students are aware that they will be making a digital film of a school trip, they become very focused. Equipped with the knowledge that the most essential aspects of the film will be its narrative content and visual images, students should all use their digital cameras / mobile phones to record key parts of the day as photos, and will furiously scribble down notes from the guided tour.

Digital video as a tool for teaching historical skills

Returning from the field trip described above, students will use MovieMaker to produce their own two-minute film about the day. Students have total control over what visual and narrative information to include. In this way, they will reflect upon the day much more would otherwise have been the case, and by comparing the films in class students are sensitized to the fact that the impressions created by historical "documentaries" are as much characterized by what "facts" the film-maker chooses to include as by their interpretation of those facts.

Similarly, during classroom debates, students will invariably miss a lot of what is said and be more concerned about how and what they are going to contribute. It is therefore useful to get each student to edit their own version of the original film down to a 5-minute "short". This will involve watching and listening to what was said by everyone and deciding what points are the most important for inclusion. This can be very useful exam preparation if the debate topic is an expected essay question on the final examination paper.

As well as reinforcing content knowledge, such exercises therefore develop historical skills by sensitizing students to the techniques used by documentary-makers to manipulate the viewer. All too often, historical documentaries in particular are used as a repository of content knowledge rather than as sources in their own right. This, for Jones-Nerzic, is a travesty: "As Goebbels argued, 'films constitute one of the most modern and scientific means of influencing the masses', yet the close examination of written sources which dominates history lessons throughout the world does little to prepare students to be critical users of the medium that is most likely to shape their understanding of the past".

At the IST students therefore produce their own Nazi Propaganda film designed to attract financial support from Goebbels. Each group produces two short films: one short scene, which is fully developed with script and storyboard, and one 'trailer' summary of the film. Cross-curricularity is interesting in this context. The students responsible for the storyboarding were able to enter the work as part of their Art coursework, whilst some of the screenplays made it into their English portfolios. Ironically, however, none of this work counted towards their final history grade!

Russel Tarr is author of the award-winning website www.activehistory.co.uk

Links

www.mrbelshaw.co.uk/extras/documentary/index.htm - An excellent Flash tutorial for MovieMaker.

<http://educationforum.ipbhost.com/index.php?showtopic=5947> - Full text of the "digital video seminar" by Richard Jones-Nerzic

www.intst.net/home/intranet/ - The Humanities website of the International School of Toulouse has many examples of student-produced digital video projects.

www.filmeducation.org/ - The Film Education website gives plenty of ideas for teaching students how to interpret and analyse films.