

Composing with DV in English Language Arts teacher education

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ABSTRACT: This article addresses how ELA teacher education can integrate an emergent technology like Digital Video (DV) into existing curriculum, in particular, focusing on the compositional aspects of DV. It addresses how DV can be contextualised within its ELA tradition and briefly speaks to why DV works in the classroom. Two examples of integrating DV in ELA teacher education – pre-service and professional development – are provided. The article concludes with issues teachers need to consider in order to be able to successfully navigate the transition between print and DV literacies: access to training, time, and curricular and technical support.

KEYWORDS: Digital Video (DV), video, composition, English Education, multimodal literacy, technology, writing process, teacher education, professional development.

INTRODUCTION

In the early stages of internet-based sales, upstart companies focused on selling specialty items directly to the consumer, often for much less than could be purchased in traditional retail outlets. Websites often limited themselves to providing a niche product – from pet food in one case to power tools in another – at substantial discounts. Larger, established retailers found themselves floundering against the potential of being undersold by web stores. Eventually, the large retailers had to fundamentally change the way they marketed and promoted their wares. They were forced to integrate the technology savvy of the smaller upstarts with their established brand name – and, more importantly, public recognition and trust – to remain competitive. After the dot.com bubble popped, most of the newer web retailers disappeared, but they indelibly changed the way consumers and retailers conducted commerce.

In a limited way, our traditional fields of study – Social Studies, Math, Science and, most importantly for discussion here, English – are somewhat like those large retailers getting sideswiped while delivering the products the good, old-fashioned way. Upstart reading and writing venues such as iTunes U, Facebook, Twitter, Kindle, smart phones, not to mention a host of dazzling video games are upstaging pens, paper and soft cover copies of *Fahrenheit 451*. How are teachers to compete?

Alarmist reactions aside, I believe that the field of English Language Arts (ELA) can learn a good lesson from the on-line commerce scenario. ELA, at its core, has been about reading and composing. If the field limits those to print-only experiences, ELA will become increasingly irrelevant. However, if the field focuses on what it has done well – research and teach about reading and composition – but with increased parameters of what it means to read and write, the field can adapt and flourish. After all, for all the attention which new bandwagon technologies like electronic readers are getting, there are landfills of outdated videodisc players and the like. The larger

processes of reading and writing, however, will be here long after iPods are museum artifacts.

This article addresses how ELA teacher education can integrate an emergent technology like Digital Video (DV) into existing curriculum, in particular, focusing on the compositional aspects of DV.

CONTEXTUALIZING DV

It is important to note the lineage of Digital Video (DV) in order to contextualize its use in ELA education. DV is a hybrid of two long-standing ELA cousins, namely, film studies and video production. Film has long been used in the ELA classroom, most often as either a viewing to an accompaniment of a canonical text or as an elective course in film appreciation (Costanzo, 1992). Video production was often what Buckingham (1992) called the “bolt-on component” (p. 11) to the curriculum as video programs were often housed in vocational education programs.

Because powerful DV editing programs come standard on both PC and Mac platforms, working with video as a compositional tool has been liberated from the propriety of specialty production labs and the schools that had the money and resources to afford them. DV is readily available to any classroom that has a computer purchased in the past decade.

Given the tremendous potential of DV, there are a growing number of researchers who have called for the incorporation of video into ELA teacher education (Bruce, 2008a; Doering, Beach, & O’Brien, 2007; Fox, 2005; Hobbs, 2007; Miller, 2007).

WHY IT WORKS

DV affords the same kinds of skills available with print, particularly in the composing of texts. For example, in applying Smagorinsky’s (2002) guiding definition of *composition*, Bruce (2008b) found that a group of low-achieving writers were able to use video to exhibit all the guiding criteria for what constituted compositional acts, something they struggled to do with print.

Using DV to create video projects requires complex compositional processes. The early video production process models used variations of linear *a priori* writing process categories (prewriting, drafting, editing, publishing). However, studies detailing the processes by which students composed with video (Brass, 2008; Bruce, 2009; Goodman, 2003; Miller, 2008; Ranker, 2008) showed that students use a number of sophisticated and recursive processes to create their productions.

DV exhibits what Miller (2007) calls the “quintessential multimodal literacy that allows orchestration of visual, aural, kinetic and verbal modes electronically” (p. 66). Bruce (2008a) states that composing with DV relies on multiple modes which include “various aspects of audio (ambient sound, sound effects, voiceovers, music) text, graphics, still images, moving images, special effects, and transitions” (p. 13). Such a compositional device is what Miller & Borowicz (2005) call a “supertool for building

bridges to powerful literacy and learning” (p. 94). In addition, video tends to be done collaboratively and tends to be taught nearly always in group contexts (Bruce, 2009; Goodman, 2003; Miller, 2007; Tyner, 1998).

A final reason why composing with DV is important to ELA deals with intended audiences. It is a commonplace that many ELA classroom assignments usually have an audience of one, particularly in the instance of written responses to print texts. While there may be editing or reviewing that is done in small group contexts, the final version usually has the teacher as lone reader. What makes DV fundamentally different is the capacity for readers in much broader contexts. Because of the collaborative potential of video, DV can be composed in groups in a way that is not possible with print. Moreover, the class itself is an important audience as all the projects can be viewed and shared in a way that a final paper cannot. However, in the use of web-based sharing services such as You Tube and iTunes, students have an audience that transcends the classroom walls. Student writers are intrinsically more motivated when they know their compositions have a shelf-life beyond the grading heap on the teacher’s desk.

DV IN A TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM

I am going to provide two examples of incorporating video with teacher education. One involves the content of a teacher education course and the other example deals with teacher professional development within a school district.

At my current university, a class on multimodal literacies has been in existence for a number of years though the content has changed as technology has evolved. Right now the curriculum content focuses on incorporating DV exercises into traditional literacy activities. In particular, there is an emphasis on broad conceptions of reading and composition, particularly as it relates to video.

Students in this class complete a total of four multimodal composition projects over the semester, several of them in collaborative groups. The DV assignments are comprised of a video theme (Bruce, 2007), a narrative sequence that focuses on the use of video grammar and a video textual response. The latter can take the form of a video poem, a narrative literary interpretation, or a book or movie trailer. The final assignment uses a comic book/graphic novel program called *Comic Life* to compose a visual literacy narrative in which they detail their reading and writing and viewing influences. Students also complete a close reading video assignment where they deconstruct an excerpt from a film. The clip is analyzed for how the component parts synergistically come together.

The following is an example of a course requirement, the video textual response. In most ELA classrooms, a foundational assignment is to read and respond to a literary text. Most often, these works are canonical readings. In our digital literacy class, students compose their responses to a print text with video. Students select a literary passage from a canonical work – most likely choosing a section from a longer work or a poem that they teach – and provide a video response to it. The activity can involve a literal or figurative interpretation. The example here contains both kinds of responses.

One of the students, Stephen, chose the poem “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” by William Carlos Williams.

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring

a farmer was ploughing
his field
the whole pageantry

of the year was
awake tingling
near

the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
the wings’ wax

insignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning.

In Stephen’s video response to this poem, he chose to compose two video versions stating that he “wanted to create to show how multiple interpretations or perspectives can be developed around the initial text, even by the same reader or viewer”. The first was a literal explanation by showing the painting by Brueghel. Zooming in on the parts of the painting to which the poem is referring, Stephen stated:

I chose this poem because there is already an established visual component – the painting of the same title by Pieter Brueghel. I wanted to create multiple video treatments of this poem, the first of which being the obvious relation of the poems stanzas to different areas of the painting itself.

His second video used still images of the space shuttle, Challenger, which exploded shortly after launching. Stephen stated:

The second treatment I developed uses the character of Icarus as a metaphor for the tragic Challenger space shuttle mission, which, like Icarus burned up in our atmosphere and fell into the ocean. After viewing the “archaic” Renaissance painting, students will see a more modern interpretation of the dangers of ambition.

Stephen composed two responses to the poem, in many ways as complex as a print analysis could be. However, by incorporating the various combinations of visuals and audio cues, his examination was fundamentally different in its representation via DV.

Throughout the whole course, the focus is on the larger compositional processes students are using while creating their DV productions. I will often stop the class while the students are working and ask each group to specify what they are working on. Invariably, each group is working on a separate compositional element – some are working with still images, some are choosing appropriate transitions, some are editing audio, others are putting the structure of their video together. They see that composition is a messy, non-linear process. Yet all of the groups are engaged in the compositional process and it helps to not lock-step them together in a common sequence. We discuss implications for their own teaching of video, particularly how their own classroom projects will mimic the iterative processes that they display in the creating of their videos. In addition, as reflection is vital to the process, it is systematically woven throughout the course and the projects. Reflection is very important in getting them to identify their compositional intentions (Bruce, 2010).

In wrapping up a look at DV integration in a teacher education program, there are three other important points to mention. The first involves the public viewing and commenting of the projects. No matter how pressed for time the class is, I always make sure to allow space for viewing the class projects. Having the immediate feedback of an audience outside of their teacher and group is essential to the compositional process. I always prompt the class to view the projects with three questions in mind: What did you notice (seeing and hearing)? What did you like? How did the video respond to the text? This focuses the conversation on the positive aspects of the compositions and invites a collaborative rather than competitive tone to the discussion.

My second point is having a number of videos for classroom examples. As I have been working with video in the classroom for nearly two decades, I have thousands of projects from which to draw upon as potential models for a given class project. Students who are just beginning this process do not. Thus, I always ensure that all videos completed in the course are made available to the class so that they have a number of examples available to show their own students. I used to have all the class projects compiled onto a DVD that the students would receive at the end of the course. With the accessibility of streaming video, however, I now post the projects to a video server that they can access or download. Whatever the format, the important issue is that the students have access to a variety of video models accessible in their teaching.

This leads to my final note for DV in teacher education, which deals with the video topics themselves. As their projects will not only be seen by their classroom, but also by the classrooms of other teachers, I encourage students in the ELA teacher education program to choose text projects that would be appropriate for work with middle- and high-school students. This not only entails selecting potential project that could be integrated into curricular units and/or themes, but also ensuring that the content is age-appropriate.

DV IN TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In this next section of the article, I am going to detail an example of integrating DV as part of teacher professional development. Currently, I am part of a research project at my university called *City Voices, City Visions* [CVCV] (www.CityVoicesCityVisions.org). This project has been working with area school districts to train teachers on integrating video literacies into the classrooms. Currently, I am working with a small rural school district in Western New York State.

In this district, teachers were offered the chance to enroll in a voluntary, professional development offering on DV. The participants engaged in 24 contact hours of video literacy training, meeting every 2-3 weeks over a four-month span. Teachers who participated in the training received continuing education credit – which could be applied toward renewing their teaching credentials – as well as a DV camera that they could use in their own classroom. The 11 participants in this group were from ELA, social studies, special education and technical education. During the professional development, participants were introduced to video assignments similar to the ones mentioned in the teacher education section. All assignments were tailored to the teachers' curriculums so that projects completed for the professional development could be used as models in their own classroom.

Since the completion of the professional development, four teachers have integrated video projects into curricular units with several other teachers planning DV tasks prior to the end of the academic year. It is noteworthy that the core of each project described below was already an established curricular assignment. What changed was the modality in which they were completed. In each case, the traditional assignment of print text to print response was altered with the introduction of DV. What follows are sketches of the projects the teachers have done.

- A teacher working with middle-school remedial readers had students create a video response to a poem. Students began with the selection of a poem, brainstorming images that the poem evoked. Using those images, students created storyboards detailing what their final project would look like. Then they videotaped those visuals, or, where appropriate, found on-line images. Students edited the video using a computer-based, DV editing program. Finally, students composed a “director’s commentary” through a systematic reflection over their compositional choices. The teacher stated that this project was a breakthrough for many of the students because most could respond to the poem through video in ways in which they could not do with print. Moreover, she said the visual nature of the project appealed to many of her readers who struggle with visualizing a print text.
- An 11th-grade social studies and ELA teacher team used the video they created in the workshop as the introduction to an Industrial Age unit. The teachers’ video was an exploration of the concept of greed, which they detailed through a variety of images and sequences dealing with connotations and aspects of avarice. This video was used to illustrate the introduction of robber barons/captains of industry. Students then, using the assignment as a basis,

created a video quilt¹, with each group presenting a different video vignette of an historical figure that was considered to be either a robber baron or a captain of industry. The videos replaced an essay on which the students wrote about the same topic. The teachers remarked how engaged the students were in the project, particularly those students who had, prior to this assignment, limited participation in classroom interactions and discussions.

- An English class participated in *Poetry Out Loud*, a performance-based poetry contest (<http://www.poetryoutloud.org>). In this established project, the teacher had students choose a poem to memorize and perform in front of a school-wide audience. The new part of the assignment had the students creating a video interpretation of the poem as well. Many of the performances and videos were presented during a school-wide assembly with all students voting for their favourites. The winning videos were presented to the school board. One student chose the poem *It's the little towns I like* by Thomas Lux. The poem describes not only the quaintness associated with small towns, but also the hardships they face during a weather-related crisis, particularly flooding. The student's response to this poem used still images of pictures taken during a flood that had devastated their community – a little town – 18 months earlier. This community was still dealing with the after-effects of that disaster. The teacher stated that the student body and staff were moved by the connection of the shared experiences they had lived through and the representation of those experiences via the video poem.

SO WHAT DO TEACHERS NEED IN ORDER TO LEARN DV?

Of the hundreds of teachers and pre-service student-teachers that I have worked with, less than 10 percent had any formal training in either the reading or composing of video. The small percentage that had been exposed to video experienced it via a film elective class with only a handful having any formal video production experience. Most of them, as traditional English majors, had extensive training in reading, analyzing, and responding to literary texts. How do we bridge this gap?

For teachers to be able to successfully navigate the transition between print and DV literacies, they need access to training, time, and curricular and technical support.

Access to training

This may seem obvious, but the importance of scaffolded training cannot be understated. Teachers who have gone through traditional schooling have been initiated into the written response requirements necessary for a print-centric curriculum. By the time ELA teachers graduate from their high school and collegiate programs, they may have written hundreds of papers. They have been trained to exhibit a performance set of skills, in most cases, the written analysis of texts. It is ironic, then, when an emergent technology such as DV arrives and there is an

¹ A video quilt is a project in which the teacher creates the framework and the students, in groups, contribute a part or vignette. This is a good introductory assignment into DV as everyone contributes to a larger final project, but their own responsibilities are relatively small. These productions can usually be done from start to finish in 1-2 classroom sessions.

expectation that teachers not only become familiar with the technology, but that they also find ways to integrate it into their existing program. Teachers are expected to be able to make the shift from print to DV without the scaffolding.

In the current school district that I am working in (Western New York), none of the participants had formal training with video – either in film literacy or video production – in any of their teacher education programs. All had numerous experiences writing papers. The administrators of their school district made a commitment to provide the professional development in order for the teachers to become familiar enough with the technology so that they would feel comfortable enough to take it into their own classrooms.

James Britton (1982) stated that when acquiring language, children learn in the context of telling stories and in the spirit of manipulative play. I have found this to be an apt explanation of DV language development as well. Students and teachers who are being exposed to formal reading and writing with video are, in essence, learning a new language. The best way for them to become fluent is to provide opportunities for telling stories via video and time to experiment (that is, play) with the technology. Teachers can be provided with a series of step-by-step tutorials to follow on their own, but there is no substitute for an authentic assignment with guided opportunities to learn with the equipment.

Time

Related to the idea above, teachers need time for this to happen. While they do not need to become experts in the video editing programs, they at least need to be able to navigate the process. This will not happen in a one-shot professional development. Even though the training within the school district I am now working with happened over a four-month period, in the exit evaluations, all of them mentioned that they would have liked to have even more supported time to learn DV.

Teachers also will need time for collaboration with other teachers. Nearly every study of video done to date has focused on the collaborative atmosphere in which most of the videos were composed. While many of the entry-level DV editing programs are designed to be user-friendly, they still require time to learn and navigate. This is best done in a collaborative fashion as the teachers learn and share with each other.

But it is not only the technical learning that is important. Even more so is the time needed for collaboration and planning in order to incorporate video into their existing curricula. With the teachers we work with in CVCV₂, we provide opportunities for considering how to incorporate DV into assignments that they already require. So rather than have students write an analysis for a poem, it is suggested that the students instead be allowed to compose a video in response to the poem. Teachers need time to consider ways in which DV can allow students to meaningfully respond to and with classroom texts. In most cases, it is not adding to already heavy curricular burdens with more assignments. Rather, we have found that many teachers are able to incorporate video into their existing curriculums by rethinking current projects. However, this cannot be done without the time to reflect and plan.

The last aspect of time deals with reflection on DV projects. I began this assignment with my students in my own high-school classroom, and have found it so valuable that I have continued it with the teachers I have worked with over the past decade (Bruce, 2010). For each DV project, I have them complete the following heuristic:

1. Describe the shot (or draw it)
2. Why did you choose to film the scene in this manner? What were you trying to show?
3. Evaluate the shot. How pleased were you with the final result? Please explain.

In answering these questions, teachers produce something akin to a director's commentary. They reflect on the larger compositional process, comparing their intentions to the final project, while also considering changes they would make if they were to do the video over again. In these reflections, I often see participants thinking through production "mistakes" and what they learned through that process.

Curricular support

With the district I am currently working with, one of the reasons that so much DV curricular integration is happening is that teachers have had support from their building principal, curriculum superintendent, school superintendent, as well as the school board.

For example, the curriculum director initiated contact with CVCV in order to inquire about getting professional development for their district. As mentioned previously, one of the teacher's projects had the videos being shown through a school-wide assembly. This only happened with the full support of the building principal. In addition, the winning videos were recognised at a school board meeting. This systemic approval of the integration of video into the school curriculum and culture makes the process valued among students, faculty and administration.

One of the more unfortunate problems I have seen from teachers who have received DV training is the resistance encountered from their school district. While the teacher has experienced the value of DV – particularly how their students have positively engaged with the reading of and writing with video – for a variety of reasons their school culture has not. While this often happens at department level with colleagues who may be resistant to non-print or perceive video literacy as a threat to their understanding of ELA, more often the resistance happens at a larger level. If the time and effort that teachers put into curricular changes are not valued by administration at the building and district arena, teachers will be discouraged from such initiatives. And if the hard work that goes into such an endeavour is not recognised, or even worse, reflects poorly on a teacher, they will be unlikely to continue such work.

Technical support

From our work with teachers with CVCV, we have seen the importance of having access to DV equipment, especially cameras. Participants in our professional development receive their own DV camera so that they will be able to experiment with it themselves and have access for their own classrooms. Often districts that

CVCV works with will purchase an additional set of DV cameras that can be signed out by teachers to be used with their classes.

However, more support is needed. For students to work in groups on video projects, teachers need more computers than the one in their classroom. Teachers need access to computer labs or mobile laptop carts. If those resources are not readily available, teachers will often forgo DV projects because the equipment is not accessible to them when they need it. In addition, teachers need to be able to securely store those projects on protected, hard-drive space or on the district computer network. Such details are often beyond the classroom expertise of many English teachers. District technical personnel and/or library media specialists are needed to provide support for classroom teachers as well.

In some ways, the best technical support often comes from the students. I have found that there are always closet technical experts in any given classroom. From my own teaching experience, I have seen that these students do not always engage in typical classroom interactions, possibly because their skills and literacies are not needed or valued. However, those students are often eager to be resources of information and technical know-how when empowered by the classroom teacher.

In examining the use of DV as a legitimate form of composition in the ELA classroom, I have provided an example of what integrating DV into teacher education – both for preparatory and professional development – looks like. Certainly this is not an exhaustive list. However, the focus of what it means to compose and read, be it with print or DV or some new technology on the horizon, is what ELA teacher education should be about.

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