Welcome to the 21st Century: New Literacies Stances to Support Student Learning with Digital Video Composing

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Multimodality

The human use of modes other than printed language to represent meaning has a long history—cave paintings, of course, but also medieval Bibles and rock/rap music. Many, including us, have argued that the use of these multiple modes has become the main way adolescents communicate, but it is now clear that using images, sounds, gestures, space, and movement to represent meanings is becoming the new human condition in the digital age.

Digital video (DV)—one of the multimodal technologies typically associated with the emergent New Literacies—is an important and exciting literacy tool for use in English education. DV has been used in a variety of ways and for numerous purposes, and the rationale for using DV in English classrooms is growing. Students show high interest and aptitude with DV; contemporary work and civic culture increasingly require reading and composing multimodal texts; the technology is ubiquitous with tablets and smartphones; and neuroscience suggests embodied learning from such representational activities (Glenberg; Miller and McVee). Perhaps most importantly, composing DV promotes meaning-making with multiple modes, providing support for new ways of learning. In an era when educational assessments are increasingly narrow, we need “multiple channels of communication” beyond print to express human ways of knowing (Freire 49). Our visual, aural, spatial, and kinesthetic ways of understanding allow more inclusive access and invite more active participation in how knowledge is represented and understood.

Some would argue that tools such as DV are best kept out of schools, left to the province of “authentic” use in youth culture. Others say that Common Core and state standards with their accompanying tests make school uses of digital media too difficult to integrate. Our work with digital video in classrooms over the past 15 years and the articles in this issue suggest otherwise.

Standards and Technology in the ELA Classroom

Addressing the use of DV in classroom settings brings up considerations about what it means to teach “English” and what role technology might play in those classrooms. Over 100 years ago, the Committee of Ten wrestled with—among other things—the goal for a high school education (Kliebard). One of the largest implications of that work dealt with the need for a high school curriculum to prepare for college. Fast forward a century later to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and the role of K–12 schooling continues to emphasize that learning is for “college and career readiness,” a mantra repeated throughout those standards.

While the CCSS heavily emphasize “college and career readiness,” the role of various media and technologies in that process receives less attention. Outside of a few framing comments in the introductory sections noting that students should be able to “analyze and create a high volume and extensive range of print and nonprint texts in media forms old and new” (Common Core State Standards 4; italics added), the peripheral mentions of technology in...
the standards tend to relate to ways of presenting information. The majority of the standards focus on listing a number of reading and writing skills that students should demonstrate, most of which have a print-based approach. It is curious that the CCSS emphasize learning for the 21st century when most of the standards could be taught with MacGuffy readers and seat-based slateboards.

There has always been a lag between advances in technology and their implementation and/or integration into school settings. Each time a new technology has become available, there has been tension between the potential of the technology for learning and the pragmatic applications for classroom use. This has been true with film, radio, television, video recordings, and others (Cuban).

Since the focus of this themed issue is on DV in the classroom, we need to contextualize its use, especially within ELA. In the history of video production in schools, it tended to be associated with course electives or after-school clubs. Schools that were fortunate enough to have sufficient funding and resources would use video for local/cable broadcasts, televised announcements, and school events. These productions mimicked the conventions of broadcast television, focusing on specialized roles of camera operators, audio technicians, graphic coordinators, directors, and on-camera talent. Editing required multiple pieces of equipment and numerous, sequential steps to complete a single edit. Given the limited access to equipment and the steep learning curve involved in making videos, there was little incentive for ELA teachers to use it in their classes. It is little wonder that David Buckingham noted that video production was the “bolt-on component” (11) of the ELA curriculum.

Digital video transitioned from the confines of a studio setting to a computer-based platform. In a relatively short period of time, DV became more readily available for classroom use. With DV’s nonlinear capabilities, the essence of what composers could do—manipulate video images, print text, and audio—has not changed, but the technologies have. In the past, cost was prohibitive. For example, in 2001 a DV camera (e.g., Canon ZR 10) cost $1,000 and necessitated DV tapes and cables. Editing the video required up-to-date computers capable of running proprietary programs (e.g., iMovie or MovieMaker) and storing the large volume files.

Today, smartphones and tablets are equipped with cameras and editing capabilities. These technologies are comparatively inexpensive and widely accessible. The changed publication outlets—for example, YouTube since 2005—make videos accessible to anyone on the Internet and provide a way for students to have an authentic audience of peers, parents, and people around the world. Thus, two of the largest issues with using DV in school settings—namely, the access to and cost of equipment—are no longer the hindrances they once were. The tools to make quality videos—authentic as those made anywhere—are available in school settings for use outside of the constraints of studios and computer labs.

Our goal for this themed issue’s introduction is not to disparage standards or elevate technology for technology’s sake. Instead, we wish to call attention to ways in which teachers and teacher educators are using/can use digital technologies to engage students in reading and composing (broadly defined) and provide support for academic and critical literacies. DV does have a number of affordances that allow for exciting learning possibilities, but only when used by teachers in ways that leverage those opportunities to compose multimodally in the context of meaningful learning.

**DV in the Classroom**

In a review of 40 studies of DV in educational settings through 2014 (Bruce, “A Review”), several themes emerged, including the importance of collaborative work to engage diverse low and high achieving students, affordances for students to engage in a complex range of representational and compositional modalities, and the processes of representing meaning and engaging students in embodied learning.

However, what was clear in numerous studies is that what matters more than the DV tools is the stance teachers take with those tools. As with any
of the other technologies available for teachers, the way it is used with students matters more than various opportunities for multimodal composing that DV offers. For example, PowerPoint can be a powerful compositional technology or it can be used as a glorified chalkboard. With DV, students will use complex compositional strategies (akin to written composition) but need teacher mediation to make those connections explicit (Bruce, “A Review”).

In classroom research on uses of video as a composing tool, the teacher’s approach has been identified as shaping the purpose. This new literacies stance (Bailey) requires teachers to mediate student composing of meaning as they move between print and nonprint texts; such support is improvised in response to emergent texts and a teacher’s purpose—not explicitly planned.

The use of the kinesthetic metaphor stance is purposeful: teachers are positioned for action to mediate students’ efforts at composing—students who need help in using their implicit knowledge of media, their transactions between print texts and multimodal ones, their interpretive and critical moves, their flights of fancy. These are teachers who see the future as dominated by image and sound—as much as by print—and who see their roles as coaches and performance spotters at points of need who sustain support for student learning and understanding during the composition process.

A teacher who takes such a stance creates a learning space that allows students to have agency to compose with support, draw on their lives and understandings, translate between print and nonprint, collaborate on design in the class and online, and publish their work for an authentic audience (Miller). Using DV as a multimodal way of reading and writing—creating and representing meaning—inherently links this new literacy to the goals of the English class.

**Overview of Articles**

The articles in this issue represent a range of practices for using DV as a teaching and learning tool in the era of CCSS and standardized assessment. Teachers are using DVs as perspective-taking tools in student research projects (“Through a New Lens”; “Standing at the Crossroads’: Content Creation in the 21st-Century English Classroom” shows integration of student written and digital composing, with its focus on a specific twelfth-grade student’s video dramatizing the agony of decision-making, a decidedly literary theme. Cercone argues that such student work can become vital content for English classes.

“Telling the Story of America: Digital Storytelling Projects in American Literature” proposes a similar link between literature and student-made video stories. In particular, immigrants, new Americans, and underrepresented minorities have compelling narratives about the diversity of America that should play a role in our study of American literature. In an American Literature class, international students listened to stories from public radio’s This American Life and used DV to compose their own American narrative experiences.

In “New Literacies and Digital Video Poems in a Seventh-Grade Classroom,” Reed provides a rich portrait of a transformed classroom context created by a beloved teacher who invites middle
school students to become agentive makers—while they also meet Common Core State Standards. Erasing the false dichotomy between standards and multimodal literacies, Mrs. Blazel assigns students multimodal composing and warmly supports their efforts. The focus on two students demonstrates how the teacher’s New Literacy stance translates to student effort and learning.

“Through a New Lens: Students as Primary Researchers” gives a detailed account of how students can become primary researchers in a reenergized inquiry project: they videotape interviews and observations to inform the research question and create DV reports to share their findings in a compelling way. Key to this strategy is providing support for students to take on new identities as knowledge creators.

In “‘Welcome to My House’: Using a New Literacies Stance to Promote Critical Literacies,” Mrs. B, a ninth-grade English teacher, brings digital texts into class to raise such issues as stereotyping and bullying. As students critique YouTube videos to understand their design and message, they also learn—with teacher support—to take a critical literacy stance toward media and compose videos with messages related to popular culture. Perttula argues that these projects are congruent with the deep reading and analysis required by CCCS, but in a much more engaging way that provides agency and support to students.

“Embracing the Messiness of Research: Documentary Video Composing as Embodied, Critical Media Literacy” focuses on using student-made documentaries as an outcome for project-based learning that the authors argue is an “embodied” learning experience. With an elaborated account of students inquiring into who rides the city bus, this piece explores how student identity and thinking changed as they made the research results their own and created a video presentation to dramatize their findings for the class.

Teacher preparation may appear to be lagging behind such innovative teacher practice because the field doesn’t always provide preservice teachers with the preparation/examples to take up digital composing—this 21st-century literacy that has become a central communicative form. Two of the articles in this issue demonstrate what is being done.

In “Life Moments in Texts: Analyzing Multimodal Memoirs of Preservice Teachers,” Kist examines more than 100 literacy autobiographies composed as multimodal texts by preservice teachers in his classes. These digital texts created over more than a decade show that few of these future English teachers remember their own English teachers or classes as positive influences on their literacy progress. Instead, they cite relatives, friends, and media. The books they cite as life-changing were not those read in school. TV shows, movies, and video games influenced their literacies more, through joyful experiences. The findings from this analysis suggest the need for more direct integration of digital composing as a learning tool for preservice English teachers and as an explicit prototype for their future students’ digital composing.

It is this type of professional development described in “Teachers First: Hands-On Professional Development with Digital Writing” that presents a regional effort to support teachers in rural schools who want to integrate DV into their curriculum and teaching. During the PD, teachers examined the historical role of the movie trailer and viewed examples made explicitly in and for ELA classrooms. Teachers used iPads to compose a movie trailer for a book or theme they were teaching. Throughout the experience they explicitly identified their composition processes and used curriculum mapping as a means to connect their projects to their classrooms.

**Into the Future**

DV composing is a problem-posing, project-based form of composing that supports making, representing, and critiquing meaning. It can engage a wide range of students and can be especially helpful for those struggling with academic literacies and diverse students whose experiences are sometimes left out of the English classroom. The many examples of success with integrating DV composing into the curriculum demonstrate that teachers no longer need to perceive digital media as extraneous to the ELA curriculum but, rather, as a necessary integration to meaningful classroom work.

In no way do we argue that DV is an educational panacea. However, we argue that video is a multimodal literacy expressed and used by adolescents and others in the digital world and that
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its place in the ELA curriculum continues to be critically examined. We have been longtime advocates for the use of DV as part of teacher education programs and sustained professional development. As English teachers for 29 years between us (and English teacher educators for 41 more), our concern is not so much with the new medium itself, but with what it allows teachers and students to do to represent and critique meaning. DV and digital media composing expand the affordances students have to make meaning from the curriculum and their lives. Whether they are writing/researching with video or critiquing media, they become makers (Rosenfeld Halverson and Sheridan), an important identity for their current and future roles in workplace and civic spaces.

As Paulo Freire put it so clearly, if students do not become makers/narrators of their knowledge, they become “objects” of others’ narration—including current media (such as it is). Ernest Morrell, Rudy Duegas, Veronica Garcia, and Jorge Lopez and others have argued for the use of critical media pedagogies with adolescents, as such engagements empower representation of student voices. We concur with such an approach, arguing that it is a matter of social justice to allow students opportunities to use familiar and/or emergent technologies in mediated and meaningful educational inquiry. Not to do so limits the ability of their available expression, fosters a top-down approach to learning, and perpetuates a narrowed representation of student assessment. If teachers learn digital composing and learn to support students’ work, then educators can mediate student abilities to read, interpret, critique, and compose their world—into almost unimaginable futures in the 22nd century.

We believe English teachers are well suited for this work. English teachers have a rich tradition of taking up a flexible stance to support student literary interpretation and composing processes as their texts emerge. Such teachers have been instrumental in using various media and related technologies for reading and composing broadly defined because their expertise is grounded in the reading of, responding to, and composing with texts. In the absence of a National Video Project, we invoke a DV composing movement that has emerged with a focus on teacher stance—teachers poised to shift, respond, and provide needed support as the nature of texts changes.

Works Cited


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