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Through a New Lens: Students as Primary Researchers

Two students each write a research essay about fad diets. One student gathers secondary sources: magazine and newspaper articles, academic or medical journal articles, and information from websites of popular diets. The other student collects primary sources such as meal and exercise plans, advertisements, and testimonials by dieters. As important, this student becomes a primary researcher by using digital video (DV) to observe and record a Weight Watchers meeting; conduct and record an interview with a nutritionist; and record an informal survey of shoppers in the diet food section of a local grocery store.

Could students conduct this type of primary research and simply take notes? Of course. With DV, however, students re-watch videos to review information, to consider different points or perspectives, and to deepen their thinking about the topic. They can also share their research in visual form with the rest of the class and teacher (and even the public, if they like). By placing themselves behind the camera, students become primary researchers, and their products become primary sources. As primary researchers, students experience meaning-making firsthand, gaining empathy and understanding for their subjects and simultaneously understanding the researcher’s perspective through active learning.

Two practical reasons for encouraging students to conduct primary research through DV are that students are already using the technology outside of school, “the texts are multimodal, communicating by using different representational means,” and “these practices flow into personal, civic, and workplace activities that are rapidly becoming pervasive cultural practices” (254). A 2007 NCTE adolescent literacy brief urges that “[a]dolescents need bridges between everyday literacy practices and classroom communities.” Performing primary research via video provides such a bridge.

However, as noted by David Bruce, multimodal composition often poses a challenge to teachers because Common Core State Standards seem to favor language specific to reading and writing over composing digitally. In “So Much Depends: Video Poetry, Media Literacy, and the Common Core State Standards,” Bruce suggests and models using reading and writing standards to justify and support media literacy (17–18). Specifically, using DV to conduct primary research as I discuss here integrates three English language arts anchor standards in writing: students “use technology to produce” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.6) and then “gather relevant information from print and digital sources” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.8) when they use that technology to produce their own, primary, digital sources. Video creation also mimics the writing process described in CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.5: “planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.”

Students seem comfortable researching secondary sources, but many have little exposure to primary research, particularly in the role of being the
primary researcher. Therefore, students first need to understand what constitutes primary research and why it's important. The Purdue OWL, a commonly used site for MLA citation and grammar rules, explains primary research in terms that students can understand, as “any type of research that you go out and collect yourself. Examples include surveys, interviews, observations, and ethnographic research”; it validates primary research as “an excellent skill to learn as it can be useful in a variety of settings including business, personal, and academic” (Driscoll and Brizee). Collecting, reading, and analyzing primary sources are all valuable learning acts, but nothing compares to becoming a primary researcher.

Assignments I have used to scaffold research with video, incorporate video compositions of various complexities, and help transform students into primary researchers include the following:

- Video observation
- Video interview
- Video integration in a textual or multimodal research assignment

I have used these assignments with first-year and second-year college writers at various levels, from developmental to advanced, and believe they can be adapted for advanced middle school students and any level of high school and college student. I use the observation and interview to complement or replace traditional assignments (such as journaling) that lead into a research essay. My students then integrate videos into textual or multimodal assignments to enhance traditional essays or to become separate, more media-rich research projects. Teachers can also integrate these DV assignments gradually to gauge how well a particular class might do. For example, I sometimes assign only the observation and interview and wait to see how research essays turn out before assigning students to incorporate their videos into an essay or a multimodal project. In what follows, I explain each of these assignments.

**Video Observation: Student as Observer**

Observation is an easy and relatively quick way for students to begin primary research. Students’ goal in the video observation is to record what they see in a setting related to their research topics for an essay or project—the raw, primary footage. Students prepare by brainstorming a list of people and settings related to their research topics. Sometimes students discuss their ideas in small groups as I facilitate discussion and informally approve their ideas. In other cases, I conduct quick conferences to ensure that students are choosing the most suitable people or settings for observation. I also try to confirm that students are comfortable using a recording device such as a cell phone. In rare cases, I require students to write about their plans prior to beginning the observation; this activity takes some of the control from students as primary researchers, but it’s helpful with those who are struggling or new to the research process.

Despite the simplicity of this assignment, students glean a surprising amount of information and insight from observations. For example, Katherine, writing about the perception of “fighting” sports in our culture, observed and used her phone to record interactions between students and instructors in a martial arts class (see Figure 1). In Katherine’s short video, she observed and recorded a hierarchy of skill and respect among the athletes. “All of the martial artists wore similar uniforms and a colored belt that symbolized their ranking,” she noted. “Everyone who wore a black belt was addressed formally by everyone else, while those who did not have a black belt were addressed by their first names.” Katherine further recorded the class reciting a creed together. While students are not to edit, alter, or participate in video observations, they do actively engage as primary researchers by choosing what to record,

**FIGURE 1.** Martial Arts Class Observation
how long to focus on one action, when to zoom, and so on. Katherine, for example, chose when to pause and when to begin recording again, so that in just two minutes she observed various actions that eventually helped her to argue that martial arts teach fighting, but also discipline and respect.

Students take responsibility for their rhetorical choices, but I do provide guidance on process and format. For example, I tell my students never to record observations without permission. Students are to keep observations to two to four minutes and may submit videos as YouTube or Vimeo links, mp4 files, or within a PowerPoint or Prezi presentation. My school uses an online course management system, but students can submit their videos through email, on Google Drive, or through any platform used predominantly by a school. Students write a brief reflection of the observation to accompany the video. Reflections require students to place observations in context and are particularly useful when I help students determine how they might use their observations in the research essay or project. I tend to use this assignment as I would when assigning students to keep a research journal, log, or list of observations in the prewriting phase of an essay or project. Students will later use their observations to guide further research or begin making claims about a topic.

**Video Interview: Student as Interviewer**

The second DV assignment that is completed before writing or composing a research essay or multimodal project is a video interview. Students can complete the video interview without having done the observation first, but I have found that the observation allows students to gain confidence with video as a behind-the-scenes investigator before they record their interviews. The assignment requires students to choose one person, preferably from the observation, and engage in deeper research by interviewing that subject. Students immediately become active learners when they must choose the most suitable person to interview based on the topic of the project. For example, Katherine chose a martial arts student who is also a grandmother to make the point that martial arts attract people who don’t necessarily want to learn only how to fight.

In addition to recording video, students must prepare for an interview by writing questions, contacting the interviewee to arrange a time and place, and planning the overall tone and format of the interview. Finally, students write a one-page reflection of the interview. As with the observation, the video interview can be submitted as a file or a link via a course management system, email, Google Drive, and so on.

I offer suggestions to guide students while allowing them to drive most of the process. Some suggestions I share include: schedule an appointment in advance and confirm the appointment; keep the interview to no longer than 15 minutes with a maximum of ten questions; list questions in the order of importance in case you run out of time and can’t ask all of them; and ask open-ended questions to prompt “quotable” responses. The Purdue OWL lists several suggestions for setting up and conducting effective interviews at https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlpint/559/ (Driscoll and Brizee).

Some students interview subjects through Skype or Facetime, allowing them to interview people who live elsewhere. For example, Alli conducted an online interview on the power of YouTube in our culture. She recorded the interview in a split screen format, showing both the interviewee (a YouTuber) and herself on the screen. She also included text versions of the interview questions alongside the visuals. For viewers, this format provided as rich an experience as if Alli’s subject had been sitting across from her. For Alli, the assignment allowed her to adapt video technology to a traditional interview assignment.

My students noted the value of these low-stakes video research assignments in a survey at the end of the term. While only 55 percent said the video observation was much more valuable than taking notes, 75 percent said recording the interview was much more valuable than taking notes. One student noted, “I felt like I was learning more and being a better researcher by taking a video. There’s only so much that you can capture by taking notes.” Several said that video helped them because they could re-watch their observations and interviews. One noted of the video interview, “I felt that recording the video allowed me to have a real conversation with the person because I didn’t have to worry about writing information down.” At this
point, students were beginning to feel like primary researchers.

**Integrating Video: Student as Primary Researcher**

Observing and interviewing are two valuable research skills, but integrating the research into a project validates students as primary researchers. Students can integrate their videos into traditional, textual essay assignments or into multimodal compositions. If the traditional research essay isn’t required in the course curriculum, or if students have already composed a traditional research essay in this or a previous class, I like to assign a multimodal research project instead. Instead of producing an essay, students produce a multimodal argument such as a website, blog or vlog, advertisement, PSA, or social media campaign.

What follows are examples of how my students have integrated their primary video research into textual and multimodal assignments. Doing so has allowed them to learn important methods in the research process, such as determining which sources are most appropriate for their topics and finding and validating those sources, but also how to conduct their own primary research and then use that research as source material in their research essays and projects. The result is an essay or multimodal project that satisfies the traditional research knowledge our students are expected to master, but that goes a step further to a media-rich experience relevant to our media-literate and -dependent society.

**Integrating Video into a Textual Essay**

- **Images as evidence**—Students use video much as they use textual sources as support for an argument or analysis. Christopher, arguing the important role of sports fans at a game, included a clip from his video interview with a “VP of Spirit” of a student pep organization, but also a clip of students influencing the outcome of a free throw at a basketball game by chanting from behind the basket and waving their arms at the shooting player (see Figure 2).
- **Spoken words as evidence**—Students use video to complement or replace textual quotes. For example, Jack used secondary articles to write about homelessness in his city. But he also recorded an interview with a homeless woman he met while volunteering at a shelter and incorporated the video into the essay with a link to a YouTube video. Jack could have simply quoted his interviewee, and he did. But the experience for the reader, seeing her and hearing her words directly from her, was much more powerful.

**Integrating Video into a Multimodal Composition**

- **Videos that feature the author**—Caleb created a video of himself cooking a healthy meal to support his argument that it’s easy to eat healthy. His multimodal project also included a Pinterest recipe and an Instagram photo and hashtag of his signature dish.
- **Videos that instruct or create awareness**—Brad, writing about public perception of police officers, created a video public service announcement to encourage viewers to respect police officers. He also created an infographic on police community service activities and wrote an editorial for a local newspaper.

**Issues: What I Learned**

While DV assignments don’t instantly transform students into primary researchers, they can help students take a step in that direction. What follows are some problems, challenges, and obstacles that some students face, accompanied by some
suggestions, tips, and ideas for using DV to help students identify themselves as primary researchers.

Aptitude and Attitude with Technology

While not all students are comfortable with video technology, a 2012 Pew Teens and Online Video study found that more than a quarter of teens who use the Internet do record and upload (Lenhart). Students don’t necessarily see their cell phones as a means to record video, though. In my classes, 69 percent said they used a cell phone to record their videos, and I thought that number might be higher given how many students own cell phones. In fact, one of my students, a smartphone owner, checked out a video camera from the library because he didn’t think his cell phone was capable of recording a quality video. The camera turned out to be so old that he couldn’t transfer the video from the camera to our class online submission site.

I also noticed that students were sometimes too demanding of themselves. One of my students reflected, “It took me awhile to find a good, free video editing software,” though nowhere did the assignment say that students should edit video. Those who did edit chose to improve the aesthetic appeal of the video by incorporating emotional background music or including a border around the video frame. These edits, though artistically appealing, didn’t improve the source as primary research, though they did present the opportunity to create a more compelling product.

In Adolescents and Digital Literacies: Learning Alongside Our Students, Sara Kajder lists several strategies for working with technology, including modeling for students by creating your own videos; allowing students to work together to help each other; and leveraging expertise from other teachers or your school’s library/media center. Most important is planning ahead. Had I known my student was planning to use a video camera, for example, I would have emphasized that a cell phone is fully capable of producing quality video. My intent was for the video observation to serve as a “guinea pig” assignment, but students tended to stress if their observation videos weren’t perfect. Instead, creating short videos together in the classroom and then uploading from our cell phones directly to the class site might make for a better first experience.

Above all, I adhere to Kajder’s advice to front-load my teaching “with content and learning goals rather than technology-driven practices” (105) so that conducting primary research takes precedence over producing fancy videos. Our learning goals focused on creating opportunities for students to become primary researchers and to produce primary sources they could use in their research essays and projects. So we needed to focus not on the technology itself, but on what it allowed students to do.

Copyright and Permissions

Students need permission to record observations or interviews with people. One useful activity is to assign students to work together to draft a standard permission form that they can provide for those whom they observe and interview. If you don’t have time to draft a permission form in class, however, many examples are available online, especially through universities (e.g., this one from Stanford: https://web.stanford.edu/group/ncpi/unspecified/student_assess_toolkit/pdf/sampleinformedconsent.pdf). Necessary elements include both parties’ names, a date, the reason for the video interview or observation, what will be done with the research (submitted only to the instructor, shown to the class, or posted on a public site such as YouTube), and a place for the interviewee or observee to sign.

Though the video observation and interview assignments should not be edited, students often progress to producing more complex videos with images, graphics, and music for use in essays and multimodal projects; in this case, students also need some instruction in copyright laws. In the past, I have used the website of the US Government Copyright Office at http://copyright.gov to help guide my students. The site clearly explains what constitutes “fair use” of images and other material and is also a primary source on copyright and fair use laws and therefore another teachable moment in a discussion of primary research. A more user-friendly source is Renee Hobbs’s book, Copyright Clarity: How Fair Use Supports Digital Learning. Hobbs breaks down the confusing copyright laws; deciphers the complicated rules applied to specific material such as charts and graphs (29), new and social media (40–41), and photographs (49); and defines the “transformativeness” standard, meaning
“the repurposing of copyrighted materials as part of the creative process” (8).

Assessment
More a challenge for teachers than for students, assessment can pose issues for anyone accustomed to traditional text-based assignments. I think it’s essential to both teachers and students to provide clear rubrics for each assignment.

My rubrics evaluate videos on basic quality but also address what students learn specifically from each video and what they practice in the research assignment as a whole. For example, if I want my students to behave as objective primary researchers, then the rubric must state that they observe without participation or bias. Likewise, if I want my students to use their videos as primary sources, then the rubric must make clear how students are to incorporate videos into the overall essay or project. Figure 3 is an example rubric for the video observation assignment.

In other words, rubrics for any video production need to focus on the overarching goals of the assignment—in this case, conducting and using primary research. A main benefit of using video for primary research is, as Kathleen Tyner notes in Literacy in a Digital World: Teaching and Learning in the Age of Information, that “students enhance their understanding of the way media are constructed, through the construction of their own products” (184). And this is the essence of primary research: students’ construction of and engagement in their own research.

Conclusion
The primary goal in my assignments has been to place students in the role of primary researchers. By scaffolding an observation, an interview, and finally integration into textual or multimodal compositions, I was able to stay focused on my teaching goal to facilitate students’ understanding of how firsthand or primary research differs from and enhances secondary research. Additionally, with video I was able to teach how to compose multimodally; how to consider video-specific issues such as setting, sound, and permissions; how to use creativity and analysis simultaneously; and how to compose for audiences beyond the classroom.

Judging from their reflections, producing videos did contribute to students’ confidence in themselves as primary researchers. They used phrases such as “ownership of the topic” and “valuable to learn through first-hand experience.” One student said, “Most assignments in other classes just have you look up work done by someone else, and it honestly gets boring.” Another noted, “I felt more in power of my essay. I was the one gathering the data rather than relying on others’ research.” One of the most satisfying comments for any teacher to read said, “Afterward, I was very proud of what I did.”

We tend to look to sources such as NCTE and Common Core (as I have even done here) to justify some of our work in digital composition. Tyner insists, and I agree, that such assignments “must be justifiable to the core curriculum, linked to some standards that are explicitly understood by both teacher and students, and authentically assessed in order for it to be valuable to students’ educations” (189). Providing students with an opportunity to become primary researchers actively engages them.

FIGURE 3. Example Rubric for Video Observation Assignment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Each criterion is assessed as Excellent, Good, Acceptable, or Insufficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation people/setting/subjects are relevant to research topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video recording is clear and easy to view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound is clear and easy to hear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student observes without interfering or participating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student refrains from editing/altering primary source (with music, graphics, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video remains within the time limit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video uploads and opens correctly for viewers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student makes appropriate rhetorical choices regarding what to record, when to pause, when to zoom and pan out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection supports student’s plans for the observation as a primary source for the research project</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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in the research process. Additionally, using the resulting video products as primary sources and composing digitally as part of an essay or project allows them to make meaning with their primary research. 🎥

**Works Cited**


Driscoll, Dana Lynn, and Allen Brizee. “What Is Primary Research and How Do I Get Started?” Purdue OWL.


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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**  
Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

“Blending the Past with Today’s Technology” helps students prepare for reading a historical novel by inviting them to research various aspects of a setting’s decade. Then, using the information they have gathered, students communicate their findings via digital tools and traditional slides. Through the sharing of their presentations, all students gain an understanding of the historical decades of their selected novels. http://bit.ly/2aY71wR