Educational Development Center

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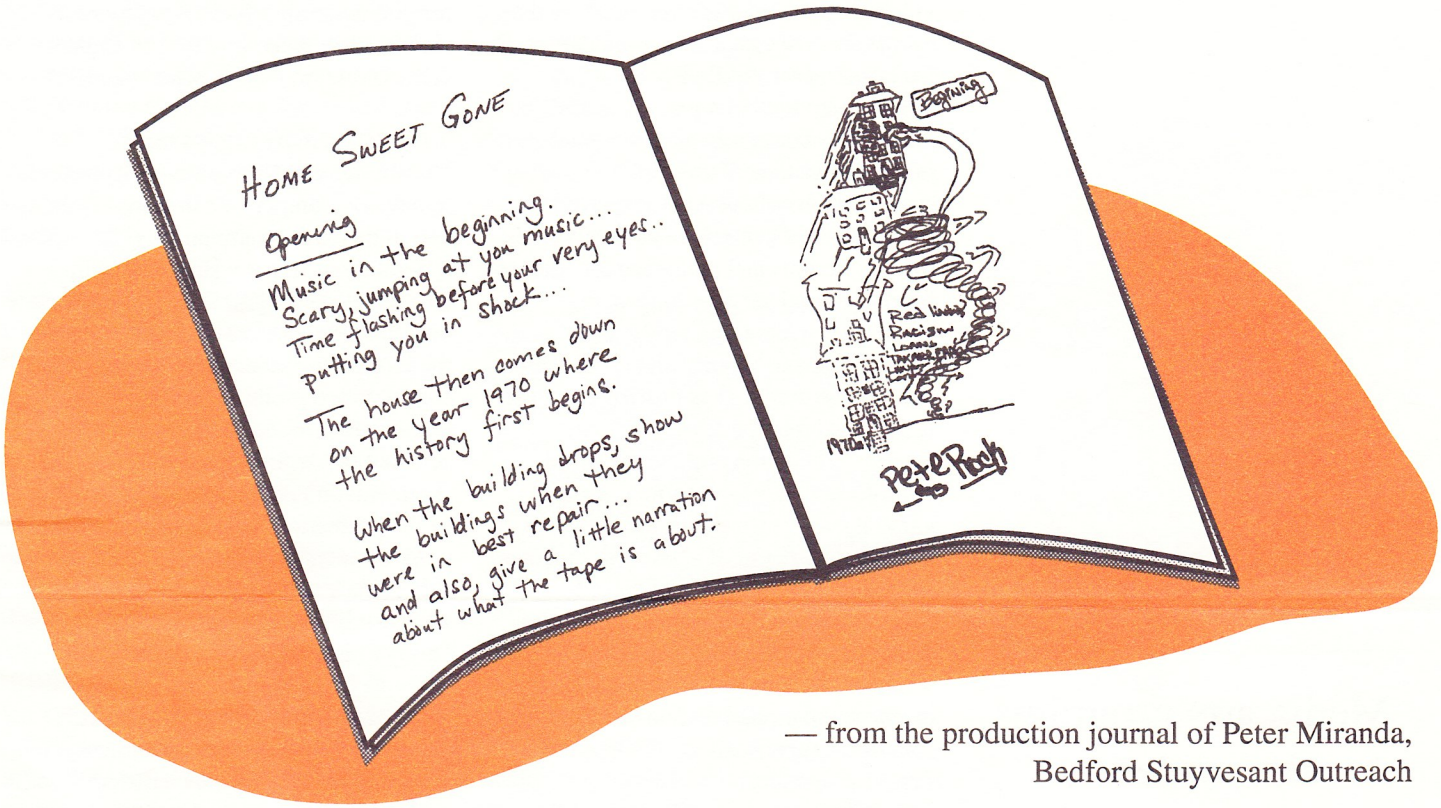
News from the Center for Children and Technology and the Center for Technology in Education



— from the production journal of Peter Miranda, Bedford Stuyvesant Outreach

Inquiry Learning Through Video Production:

The drawing and text above are preparatory sketches for "*Home Sweet Gone*," a documentary video about urban housing made by high school-age students at the Educational Video Center (EVC) in New York City. EVC is a community-based media arts center that trains young people – mostly African American and Latino and often labeled 'at-risk' – to make videos about issues of immediate importance to them. *Home Sweet Gone* is a moving analysis of housing abandonment and its effects on the communities where students live. In making their video, Peter and his peers were involved in a rich collaborative project that required research, writing, planning, interviewing, camerawork and editing, and public speaking.

Lessons from the Educational Video Center

CCT began working with Educational Video Center in order to document how video production could be organized in schools to promote rigorous, collaborative student inquiry and expression. Additionally, in a project funded by the Nathan Cummings Foundation, the EVC staff asked us to help them assess what students learn through these long-term video projects. Our work with EVC has helped us begin to answer questions such as: what fluencies can students learn in and through the video medium? How can teachers organize classroom work with video to help students get the most from video projects? In this newsletter we report on some of what we have learned.

Video Production as Knowledge Construction

EVC's practice builds on the youth empowerment approach to video production. Over the past 10 years, instructors have taken the strengths of this approach, in particular its focus on authenticity and student voice, and added strategies for emphasizing long-term collaborative student inquiry. Following the lead of the National Writing Project and other curriculum reforms, they also infused the production process with many kinds of writing.

The importance of inquiry

The documentary genre makes inquiry central. In the journal entries at right, Delroy develops a question about the problem of abandoned housing and begins to answer it based on his own experience. He and his team went on to identify sources of information on abandoned housing, visit blighted neighborhoods to gather footage, study the history of abandonment in library texts, and most importantly, to interview city housing officials, community activists and residents.

Working with interview material is important because students are likely to encounter conflicting perspectives, and the process of shaping a coherent story from them can lead to a new understanding of their roles as constructors of knowledge. In *Home Sweet Gone*, for example, Delroy and his peers were able to juxtapose bureaucrats' denials of the housing problem with images of its reality, and with the efforts of community members to solve the problem.

As in any inquiry, students' questions and answers keep evolving, and only come to an end with the final edit. In fact, in the public screenings that end each term, students discover that the meaning of their work continues to evolve through dialogue with different audiences. It is through this process of ongoing dialogue with the community that the term "empowerment" takes on added meaning: students' consciousness of their very real impact in the world.

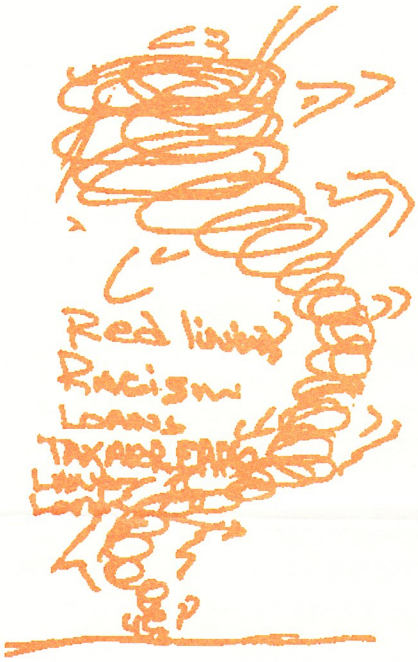
The production process at EVC takes advantage of several features of the video medium that are frequently overlooked:

A public medium. Video is prominent in our culture and in students' lives. One consequence is that the *audience* for a work in video is generally wider than for other media. It can include peers, parents, the school and the wider community. Keeping these real audiences in mind can motivate students to undertake the challenging task of shaping and revising a meaningful work.

A documentary medium. The video camera enables students to bring pieces of 'reality' into the laboratory of the classroom, where they can be reflected on, discussed and shaped into something new. The camera lens can both bring phenomena that are typically remote from the classroom up close for scrutiny, and create analytic distance from everyday realities that may otherwise be too "'close" to see.

A collaborative medium. Video production requires many hands and many eyes. In the production phase alone, students must divide responsibility for a range of tasks, which may include management of camera, sound, lights, direction and script. This can make video an ideal medium for working on the challenges of group work. Teachers can observe how gender and other factors influence students' choice of roles, and intervene by calling students' attention to group processes.

A multi-disciplinary medium. A video production project can organize content learning in any area of the curriculum. Students can investigate questions in science, literature, social studies, even math. Whatever the content area, student producers must actively conduct research, write, plan and revise work, and learn to do all of these in cooperation with one another.



Why don't the City renovate abandoned buildings? 3/2/92

From my experience of seeing and living around abandoned buildings I can tell you that it cause drug dealers to use the places to sell drugs and it causes crime and unsanitary conditions. 3/3/92

— Journal entries of Delroy Pratt, *Home Sweet Gone*

The Writing Process: An Analogy

The challenge of moving from incidental, peripheral video production in the classroom to more ambitious use of the medium is hampered by the time-intensive nature of the undertaking, teachers' unfamiliarity with the production process, and the very limited time and support teachers have for experimenting with curriculum innovations.

One way for teachers who are not familiar with video production to understand how it can be organized in the classroom is through an analogy to the writing process. At a very general level, professional video production corresponds to the broad stages of the writing process, including planning (pre-production), writing (production) and revising and editing (post-production) On a more specific level, common features of the writing process approach include immersion in literature, free-writing, finding a topic, writing multiple drafts and sharing them with peers, and polishing a finished piece. In a similar way, EVC instructors guide students through a process that includes initial screenings, exploration with the camera, choosing and researching topics, shooting and logging footage, editing and screening rough-cuts, and editing the final version.

Each of the following key moments in EVC's production process suggests ways for classroom teachers to deepen their students' work with video production.

Initial screenings. Good video makers must be viewers first. The video workshop at EVC begins with a screening of a range of works, including those made by youth producers and people of different cultural backgrounds. Following each, students write about and discuss the makers' intentions, the target audiences, and stylistic differences. They begin to see that the communicative range of video is wider than mainstream television, and to recognize the values and conventions that distinguish the independent documentary genre.

First camera workshop. At EVC, students work in small groups to set up and experiment with the features of the camera, without worrying unduly about the outcome. The point is to get a feel for setting up and handling sometimes awkward equipment, and to note how changes in lighting, framing, camera angle and movement influence how the subject appears. We observed that students' initial choices in relation to the equipment often said something about their past experiences with media, as when girls shied away from the camera or particular boys kept on "hamming it up."

Choosing a topic. Finding a topic that matters to *all* students is particularly important in the video medium, since success depends on the commitment of every member of the production team. At EVC choosing topics is an intensive 2-day process that begins with brainstorming and exploratory writing. The second day students draft mini-proposals for the topics most important to them and argue for them before the group. Instructors suggest critical questions to use as criteria: Is the topic important to a youth audience? Will it provoke all viewers to think and respond? Is it practical to do in the time and with the resources and contacts that we have? Which would you most like to work on?

Research and planning. Research begins with students generating an initial set of questions. Next they brainstorm all of the possible resources, locations and personal contacts that might serve as sources of useful information. They are encouraged to consider their own neighbors, friends and family members as potential resources, in addition to more "official" sources. Teams then choose which questions and which resources they will investigate. Some may head for the phones, some for the library, others out to scout locations. They share what they have discovered in daily production conferences, which allows instructors to help students refine their questions as they plan for interviews and location shoots.

Shooting and logging footage. Shoots provide opportunities for students to perform one of several creative roles, such

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At an Open House during the making of *Home Sweet Gone*, students listened, took notes and responded while family and friends reacted to their rough-cut tape:

As I sat and watched my project as part of an audience I felt amused with delight and astonishment, and with great concern of what the other people might say or comment about it, and the reactions on their faces....And to my surprise, it was very helpful to see and hear the different questions that were asked and answered.

—David Fuentes' journal

Joan Auclair

as camera, sound recorder, interviewer, script person, and director. Each role offers its own challenges, risks and rewards. Promptly screening raw footage with the group and discussing what its strengths and weaknesses are in a non-judgmental way helps students understand good production techniques. In logging the tapes, and methodically summarizing all the video and audio shot, students gain an invaluable familiarity with the material they will shape into a coherent story.

Editing and sharing rough-cuts. During the editing phase, students draw together all of their materials, reflect on their own responses to what they have discovered, and begin to build their argument. The process starts with building an edit plan – a rough outline of the tape's main ideas and the images, sounds and interviews that will convey them. Instructors at EVC encourage students to think more visually at this stage, as they begin to design the form as well as the content of the tape. One or two rough-cut versions of the videotape are then edited, and can be screened to different audiences.

Public screening of final tape. Public screenings allow youngsters to connect with real audiences for their work. At EVC, an effort is made to make the audience for the final screening as diverse as possible, including parents, peers, teachers, media professionals and community members. At the screening, students briefly introduce their tape, and afterwards often preside over lively debate provoked by their work. The atmosphere is usually both serious and celebratory. Students feel obvious pride in their efforts and accomplishments, but also feel compelled to address the audience's questions, often in great depth.

Conclusions

This kind of student video production is an ambitious undertaking, because the production process drives student learning for a significant period of time. Teachers need many kinds of institutional support for this kind of curriculum change, including more preparation time, longer class periods, access to equipment and technical support, the ability to purchase supplies (such as batteries or cables) on short notice, and freedom to leave the school building with students and equipment. This model also means turning over control of much of the learning process to students.

Additionally, of course, teachers need to acquire experience as video producers. As a partial response to this need, EVC runs a Summer Institute offering high school teachers the same hands-on experience students experience. And this is where the most useful lesson from the writing process analogy may ultimately lie. For just as teachers who immerse themselves in writing and learning alongside their students in the Writers' Workshop send a powerful message to youngsters about the meaning and purpose of writing, so teachers can use their curiosity and enthusiasm for exploring the video medium as an open invitation to students that says, "come join me."

ABOUT EVC

Educational Video Center is a non-profit media center that trains community-based high school students from all over New York City in media production and media analysis. Students attend the documentary workshop four afternoons a week for a semester and earn school credit for their work.

EVC documentaries have won over 60 awards nationally and internationally and have been broadcast nationwide on cable and the ABC, NBC and PBS networks. Each EVC tape has an accompanying curriculum guide to assist educators in using the tapes to enhance reading, writing and group problem-solving skills at the high school and college level.

EVC also offers a Summer Teacher Training Institute during which public school teachers gain hands-on experience in video production and editing in order to facilitate incorporating video production and media literacy into their classes. EVC also publishes "Video and Learning," a newsletter by and for educators designed to promote greater dialogue and sharing of strategies among teachers working with video.

EVC Video Productions.
All EVC tapes are available for sale or rental. For a catalogue or more information, contact: Educational Video Center, 60 East 13th Street, New York, NY 10003; Tel: (212) 254-2848; Fax: (212) 777-7940.

Top Eight Titles:
AIDS: FACTS OVER FEAR (Health)
ABORTION: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE (Health)
BLACKS AND JEWS: ARE THEY REALLY SWORN ENEMIES? (Race Relations)
CRACK CLOUDS OVER HELL'S KITCHEN (Substance Abuse)
HARD TIMES IN CYPRESS HILLS (Youth Violence)
2371 SECOND AVENUE: AN EAST HARLEM STORY (Housing)
TO SERVE AND PROTECT? (Police-youth relations)
TRASH THY NEIGHBOR (Pollution and the environment)

Assessment of Student Learning In Video Projects

How do you grade a video project?

Funded by the Nathan Cummings Foundation, CCT researchers helped EVC instructors assess student learning in the Youth and Media Arts Assessment Project. We wanted to develop reliable portraits of student learning in complex video projects, to help students reflect on their own learning process, and to help other teachers better understand how to evaluate students' visual work.

The result is a portfolio assessment model adapted to student video work. A portfolio is essentially a collection of student work that exhibits a student's efforts, accomplishments and growth over time. It is also a space for reflection and conversation about ways to deepen students' work.

The portfolios we designed are somewhat unusual in that they include records of a very broad range of work, generally in multiple media. Throughout the term, students collect their work in six different portfolios — Technical Arts (camera work, lighting and sound), Research, Writing, Editing, Critical Viewing and Public Speaking. The portfolios may contain written work, videotapes or art work. A student's first interview may be kept on tape in her Public Speaking portfolio, for example, while the list of polished questions which she worked from in the interview might be in her Writing portfolio.

Instructors and peers review and comment on the works-in-progress so that students gain the benefit of others' reactions and can revise their work accordingly. At the end of the term, students choose two portfolios to present to a panel of teachers, artists and community members who evaluate them according to collectively-developed criteria. Performance may be rated as non-proficient, proficient or masterful (see at right). Workshop instructors then summarize students' performance in all six categories, taking the panel's assessment and students' own self-assessments into account.

Building a culture of self-reflection via portfolio assessment is an evolutionary process, and the process begun at EVC continues to be refined. There are ongoing challenges to consider. Reflection is very time-consuming for both teachers and students. Also, since video production is highly collaborative in nature, the design of assessment that balances judgments about individual and group work continues to be debated.

Finally, well developed standards for judging visual work do not exist. These standards must initially be created by particular communities of media educators, according to their own goals and values. The boxes on this page show some of the qualities of a video work that instructors at EVC want students to develop. Rubrics like these need to be shared and refined by different practitioner communities in order to develop a wider consensus about standards.

Qualities of Final Documentaries

Technical proficiency
- image
- audio
- editing
- special effects

Story structure
- compelling storyline
- visual storytelling
  - emphasis
  - contradiction
  - building tension
- visual genres and conventions

Content
- argument developed
- depth
- multiple angles
- critical perspective

Student voice
- youth perspective
- personal voice
- uniqueness

Examples of portfolio criteria from EVC

Critical Viewing Portfolio

A proficient critical review meets these criteria:
- Identifies the main point or message;
- Recognizes that someone's point of view is expressed;
- Emphasizes your own personal response

A masterful critical review meets these criteria:
- Evaluates the message as an argument for or against something;
- Considers the possible audience, and their response;
- Evaluates how the elements of video are used to get the message across: music, lighting, framing, camera angle, movement, editing, narration, etc.;
- Discusses what may be missing from the piece, such as certain people, images or ideas that would improve it.

Editing Portfolio

Five things proficient editing does:
- Tells a story with a beginning, middle and end;
- Tells a story that is relevant and meaningful to a youth audience;
- Maintains consistent sound levels;
- Edits are clean
- Edits are logical in content (ideas, dialogue) and compositions (framing, camera movement)

Four things masterful editing does:
- Presents central themes in a coherent and compelling way;
- Advances the story even with the sound off;
- Layers images (action titles, effects) and sounds (dialogue, narration, music, effects) in ways that add ideas or feelings to the story;
- Uses rhetorical techniques such as point/counterpoint, emphasis, contrast or contradiction, building tension, expanding or contracting time.