LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION: USING MOVIE MAKING TO MOTIVATE ADOLESCENT STRUGGLING READERS TO READ AND ENGAGE THEM IN THE READING PROCESS

By

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ABSTRACT

Many teachers and researchers have found that motivation and engagement seem to decline as students enter adolescence, and one of the causing factors is limited opportunities for creative expression. Moviemaking a text undoubtedly encourages students' creative expression to a great extent. This paper explores the integration of moviemaking in an eighth-grade classroom where more than half of the students were considered struggling readers. The author describes in detail the steps of how moviemaking was integrated to motivate adolescent students to read and further engage them in the reading process, from book introduction, reading and script preparation, to movie shooting and editing. Moreover, the author discusses the issues encountered at different stages, and solutions they came up with together. This paper suggests that adolescents' literacy need to be re-evaluated especially these nontraditional or "non-academic" digital literacies. Adolescents especially struggling adolescents must be given opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities in these literacy activities, which helps build their self-efficacy in school reading and learning. But this process must be scaffolded. Ideas of how to scaffold adolescents' participation are shared.

Keywords: Moviemaking, Reading Instruction-motivation and Engagement, Adolescent Struggling Readers.

INTRODUCTION

Technological developments are impacting on the teaching and learning in today's schools. In particular, the use of moviemaking with just a mini-DV camcorder and a computer is increasing in classrooms. Movies and videos have been common in classrooms for over a decade, but the digital aspect allows students to generate their own movies/videos. By doing so, students assume the roles of scriptwriters, camera crew, editors, directors and actors/actresses. In language arts classrooms, some teachers are using moviemaking to motive students especially those struggling readers to read those classic texts that students are often not willing to read. In order to make a good movie out of a certain text, students must well understand and interpret the text, which helps to engage students in the reading process actively.

This paper shares an example of using moviemaking in an eighth-grade language arts classroom in the hope of demonstrating to other classroom teachers the process of how moviemaking is integrated to motivate students to read and further engage them in the reading process, the issues encountered at different stages, and solutions they came up with together. Ideas of how to scaffold students' participation are also shared.

Theoretical Background

Albert Bandura (1986) suggests that motivation (or a lack thereof) is the result of an individual's self-efficacy related to a task, which is critical to a student's success. However, motivation and engagement seem to decline as students enter adolescence (Kamil et. al., 2008), and one of the causing factors is limited opportunities for creative expression. Moviemaking a text undoubtedly encourages students' creative expression to a great extent.

Chambers (1996) sends a very clear message that a reading teacher's work includes "helping children to engage in the drama of reading, helping them to become dramatist (rewriter of the text), director (interpreter of the text), actor (performer of the text), audience (actively responsive recipient of the text), even critic (commentator and explicator and scholarly student of the text) (p. 5).

When students script and act out a piece of literature, they have to understand characters and other elements of the text and get the meaning and tone across to others. Therefore, their comprehension of the text is increased. Mitchell (2003) asserts that "creating and performing a script is fun and highly motivational because others will see our performance and respond to it." (p.130) She also found that "drama not only enhanced (students') engagement with text but also improved their interactions with the other students in the class." (p.131) Moviemaking a text using a camcorder and a computer not only allows students to dramatize a text but also increases students' involvement and motivation with its digital aspect of editing and annotating that are not available in traditional classroom drama demonstrations (Kearney & Schuck, 2005).

This motivational and engaging learning process of moviemaking a text does not happen automatically; it needs a teacher's scaffolding. Vygotsky (1978) states that the cognitive development of children and adolescents is enhanced when they work in their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD for short). To reach the ZPD, students need the help of adults or more competent individuals to support or scaffold them as they are learning new things. According to Vygotsky's theory, children can do more with the help and guidance of an adult or other person more experienced person than they can do by themselves. The Zone of Proximal Development defines skills and abilities that are in the process of developing. The ZPD is the range of tasks that one cannot yet perform independently, but can accomplish with the help of a more competent individual.

Context

Consistent with what Kamil et. al. (2008) have found, more than half of the seventeen eighth-grade adolescents in Great Middle School were considered as struggling readers or unmotivated readers, unmotivated to read and/or unable to decode/comprehend grade-level texts. Students must learn to read by reading texts and the reading process is supposed to be joyful and motivational. Mrs. Smith (pseudonym), their Reading/Language Arts teacher had been researching and experimenting with different approaches/methods to motivate these students

to read and improve their reading levels. One of the methods that Mrs. Smith found very powerful was moviemaking which encourages students' creative expression of what they read.

Since many of the students in Mrs. Smith's class had never owned a camcorder in their families, the introduction of the camcorder itself already aroused students' interest. Realizing they had to make their own movies using the camcorder and a computer based on what they would read, students were highly motivated to read the text. As a language arts teacher, Mrs. Smith took many technology workshops such as those on how to use the i-movie software and moviemakers. This training allowed Mrs. Smith to guide students through the moviemaking process. Moreover, she built good relationships with the teaching staff in her school district and she could rely on them when she had questions and/or difficulties.

Description of a Moviemaking Integration Project-Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

To start the moviemaking integration project on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818, 1981), Mrs. Smith first presented a mini-lesson to lay foundation, access students' prior knowledge, and set goals/objectives. Mrs. Smith introduced Mary Shelley and her book *Frankenstein* (1818, 1981) by reviewing the horror stories students had read and themes like friendship. After that, she told them that they were going to read *Frankenstein,* choose a theme expressed in the book, and make a movie to express that theme using the camcorder together with their group members. Importantly, Mrs. Smith set a real purpose that they would create a movie to express a theme they would select. Purpose setting is critical to strategic reading since it can help readers stay focused and engaged. Obviously, Mrs. Smith's purpose setting was successful especially when it was combined with technology which today's students are always fascinated with. Also, Mrs. Smith's scaffolding started from the right beginning by activating students' prior knowledge.

After the purpose setting, students started to read the abridged version of *Frankenstein* together. In the reading process, they stopped periodically to discuss, take notes, complete activities, etc. These activities actually

stimulated the class's involvement and enjoyment of the book. Slowing down the reading process encouraged students to relate to the characters and events of the book. During and after the reading, students were guided and stimulated by Mrs. Smith to think about the themes in the book and the messages entailed.

After they finished reading *Frankenstein*, students then brainstormed themes/topics together. As a whole class together students brainstormed themes expressed in the book on the white board. Themes they came up with include companionship, friendship, science vs. religion, freedom, man vs. nature, etc. Among all the different themes on the board, Mrs. Smith asked students to pick a theme for their movie. Those who picked the same theme became a team. For example, those who chose the theme of Science Vs. Religion formed a team.

After they decided their topic/theme and formed their team, in order to better understand the book and the theme before starting to write their scripts, as a team students reread the parts of the book that express the theme, and then read and reread the corresponding parts in the original version of *Frankenstein*. They also did research on the background information of the book until they clearly understood how to write the scripts. Focusing on the meaning and interpretation, students read all these materials out of their own interest especially when they wanted to show their team that they could be relied on.

Towards the end of their research, students started to write scripts together with their group members. Mrs. Smith presented several mini-lessons on how to write scripts based on texts and guided students through the learning process. Books such as *Readers' Theatre for Young Adults: Scripts and Script Development* (Latrobe & Laughlin, 1989) provided step-by-step guidance for producing scripts and examples. During the script writing process, they frequently visited the book(s) and other sources in order to get more accurate interpretations. They were guided by Mrs. Smith to be mindful of these questions: what message were they sending? Why did they want to send that message? Who was their audience? Would they have a different interpretation of that message?

After they finished writing their scripts, each group put their drafts on the white board in powerpoint format for the class to critique, with photographs to help communicate meaning. They read each other's scripts, asked questions, requested further clarifications, and provided their opinions and comments. Scripts writers answered questions, provided further explanations or clarifications, and took notes for further revisions. These communications deepened their understanding of the book while giving them insights or ideas to refine their writing. During this process, their critical thinking, writing, and effective communication skills were thus enhanced. Mrs. Smith reminded them of these questions if necessary: What message was sent? Was that message concise? Why to send that message? Relationship with the text? Based on the critiques and meaning communication results, each team revised their scripts until they were satisfied. Mrs. Smith provided advice when needed.

As soon as they felt satisfied with their scripts, students discussed and decided who would take which roles, and where to shoot the movie. Finally, the students chose a 1960-style hotel room to shoot their movies. They then made costumes and learned how to make a video using camcorder and softwares such as Windows Moviemaker or Apple Imovie. Mrs. Smith and the students reviewed the steps for making a movie before their first scene.

Students finally could shoot their scenes using the camcorder. The students were so involved that sometimes they would shoot a scene several times until each team member agreed to move on. Again, Mrs. Smith asked the students to think about the questions of "what techniques are used to attract attention?" besides the questions they asked when they wrote and revised their scripts.

Students then edited their movies using Windows MovieMaker, Imovie, etc. They explored adding music and different effects under Mrs. Smith's guidance. They consulted the websites of homepage.mac.com/torres21/ and http://center.uoregon.edu/ISTE/uploads/NECC2006/KEY_13349523/Herzog_MovieMakerTutorial.pdf for detailed instruction and examples.

Finally, students presented their movies to the class. Again the class responded to their own and peers' final products guided by the questions they asked before. After the show,

Mrs. Smith and her class reflected on their moviemaking experience and what they achieved from this experience. These reflections highlighted their new understandings of the book, the author, and the reading activity itself. "They ended up remembering it (the novel), and Mary Shelley…" Mrs. Smith was very proud of her students.

Students developed new understandings and formed new inquiries for further reading. Due to the moviemaking experience, students, especially those unmotivated adolescent readers wanted to know more about their own and/or other team's topics. Mrs. Smith thus helped them make new reading plans and recommended books to them. Impressively, thanks to the moviemaking project and many other activities, those struggling readers together with the others developed stronger interest in reading and all passed the test at the end of the school year.

Discussions and Conclusions

Reflecting on the moviemaking integration project, one could easily see the significance of teacher's scaffolding in the whole moviemaking process. Mrs. Smith guided them through from the very beginning to the very end. Same as many other classroom teachers who want to implement new technologies in their content teaching, Mrs. Smith did not know how to turn a book into a movie at the beginning, but she made it through several steps. She got the idea of using moviemaking to help her struggling readers become better readers when she talked with her students and when she attended a conference session on moviemaking. She then went to several workshop sessions and learned by herself how to make a movie using a camcorder and a computer. She also consulted their school technology to support, when she and her students had questions. Sometimes, the students learned even faster than her, which was perfectly fine with both her students and her. What really mattered was that her students including those struggling readers got motivated to read the book and fully engaged in the reading and moviemaking processes. The students presented their movies to the whole district a week after their class show. Being admired and feeling capable of successful learning, they developed stronger self-efficacy in reading and learning, which led to much more effective learning.

It takes time to complete a moviemaking project. As a teacher, Mrs. Smith had to be very patient. She was frustrated when some perfectionist students for example spent more time on making perfect costumes or adding special effects to their movies. But she did not show her frustration to her students; instead, she talked with them, provided suggestions, and reminded them of the deadlines for each stage. She kept reminding herself that she was helping her students in a long run. It was such a reward to her when her students started to read a book from back to back and eventually passed the state reading test. Besides themes, teachers can also guide students to focus on other literature elements such as characters and plots in a moviemaking project.

Depending on the circumstances and confidential policy, some classes may choose to put their movies on the class website, and some could even put their movies on YouTube.com (One can visit http://www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/internet/page5876.cfm to learn how to promote videos to a wider audience.) When more people watch their performance and respond to it, students will likely be further motivated to read more and perform better.

Teachers can always adapt the steps of moviemaking a text depending on the time and availability of equipments. For example, teachers can simply ask students to dramatize a text in class as long as they can be engaged in reading and further motivated to read more about certain topics. In the dramatizing or moviemaking process, students develop the skills of reading, writing, critical thinking, cooperating, and many other skills.

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