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Nicholas Vick

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The Video Essay

NICHOLAS VICK

Tallahassee Community College

Abstract: The video essay is an opportunity for students to record their words and combine other visual elements to complete the typical requirements of a standard written paper. Applicable across disciplines and pedagogically aligned with an honors ethos of self-directed learning, video essays allow for individual and collaborative forms of expression while providing unique approaches to compositional assessment on an array of subjects.

Keywords: digital video; learning strategies; composition—study and teaching; YouTube; Tallahassee Community College (FL)—Honors Program

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Most honors courses emphasize developing written communication and moral communication skills, synthesizing complex course content, and engaging in critical thinking. Courses that underscore these standard goals naturally provide opportunities through various forms of rigorous assessment designed to inspire innovation and creativity. One common form of assessment in an honors course is an essay or a research paper. These traditional assignments are noteworthy and demand that students use rhetorical principles to support a thesis statement and develop supporting ideas, but students are likely writing essays in several other classes as well. If an ancillary goal of honors is for students to have a unique experience plus develop in the cognitive areas outlined above, consider the potential value of a video essay.

The video essay is an opportunity for students to record their words along with other visual elements to complete the typical requirements of a standard written paper. The primary audio of a video essay is a student’s recorded voice of the “script” or the essay itself, but this type of assignment can and should include many different forms of communicative expression such as photos,

videos, artwork, charts, graphs, music, and more. In adhering to the honors pedagogical philosophy of allowing students choice and freedom, the video essay options could be presented as choices for students to decide which forms of expression to include.

Many students will likely have never completed a video essay and may benefit from viewing examples on YouTube or elsewhere to gain a sense of the unique possibilities that this assignment provides. Students might feel comforted when realizing that many of their favorite edited YouTube videos are similar to video essays. There will be a central thesis, a synchronized progression of thought with supporting details or research, and a conclusion of some sort. A few common logistical student concerns about this type of assignment might be how to edit their work or even the best platform for recording themselves. These concerns are valid but are ultimately a part of the challenge that this assignment provides. There are many free online platforms that make recording and editing (if needed) relatively simple. It might help to provide students a list of resources for completing this assignment although other students may prefer to explore possibilities independently.

A major benefit of the video essay for honors educators is its general applicability across academic disciplines. The expectations or requirements of the assignment might need to be slightly altered, but the video essay is equally effective in science, history, English, math, psychology, honors seminar classes, and others. Most honors classes highlight interdisciplinary thinking, and this form of assessment assuredly calls for a multidimensional skillset. A variation of this assignment might be for students to work cooperatively to complete a video essay with partners or in small groups. If partners were debating a particular topic, it could provide an interesting way to evaluate the construction of an academic argument within a given discipline. Students could even present their individual video essays in class to facilitate a discussion with their peers. Additionally, the video essay could be used as a capstone assignment in a course for students to reflect on key learning outcomes during the semester. Of course, the variations of a video essay are endless and only limited by the instructor's imagination.

When students have completed the video essay, they will have practiced sharing their work orally in a way that is commonly found at academic conferences. There is tremendous value in allowing students a safe opportunity to share their work and build confidence within an academic setting. With all major assessments in an honors course, it is helpful to provide a time for either formal or informal reflection. This reflection might be as simple as students

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focusing on the pros and cons of their video essay, which aids the instructor in designing future assessments and is also a useful cognitive activity for the student. Overall, the video essay provides a unique assignment to challenge students in a range of conceptual skills.

The author may be contacted at

vickn@tcc.fl.edu.