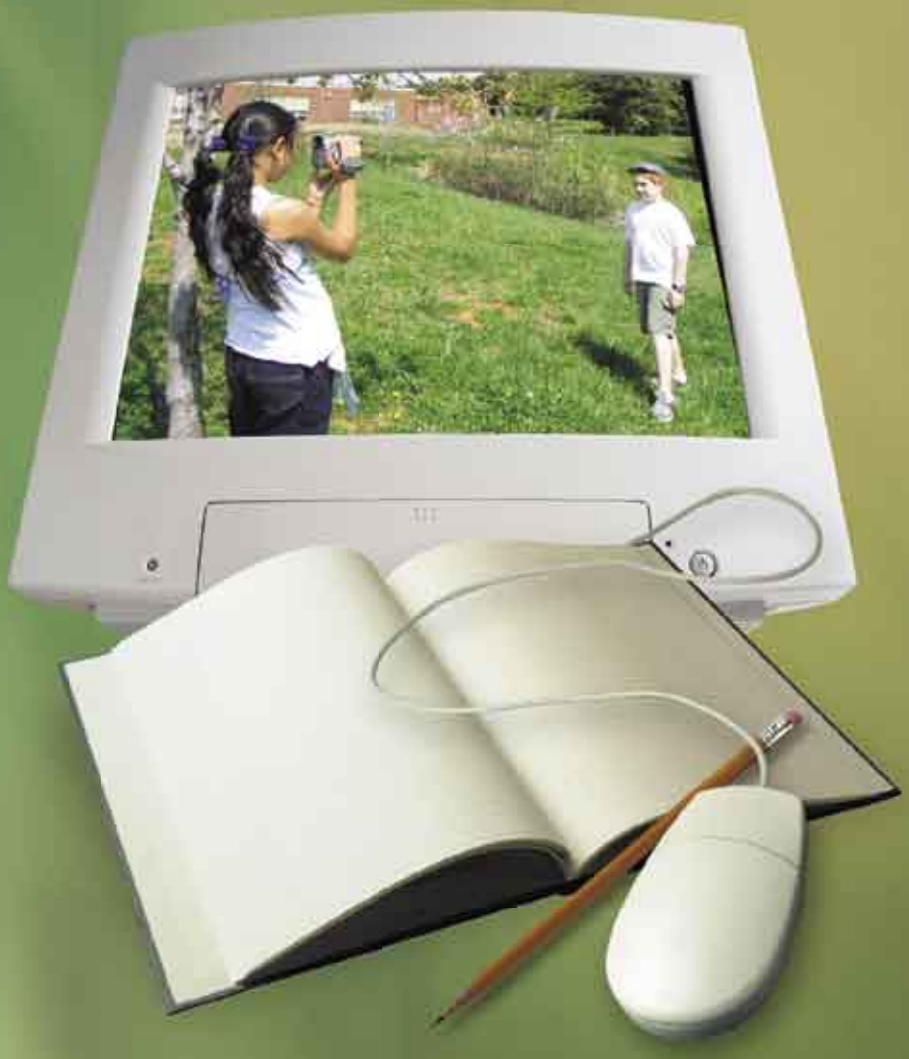
Splicing Video into the Writing Process



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Subject: Writing across the curriculum

Grades: 5–8 (Ages 10–13)

Technology: Digital video

Standards: *NETS•S* 3–5; *NETS•T* II, III (http://www.iste.org/standards/). *ELA* 4, 5, 7 (http://www.ncte.org/standards/standards.shtml). *NCSS* Curriculum Standards II (http://www.ncss.org/standards/).

PHOTO BY DIANE HARDING

It's mid-October; the rolling hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains are turning from gold to red as Civil War drama fills the halls of Paul H. Cale Elementary School in Charlottesville, Virginia. Soon students will don blue and gray caps, draw on mustaches and beards, and bandage "wounded" heads. But for now, Cale's fifth graders are clustered in groups of two and three, intently revising scripts. "No," a dark-eyed, curly-haired girl says to her partner. "You're a news reporter. You have to sound like a grown up. Don't say 'See ya' at the end of the interview. Say, 'This is Mike Thompson, signing off for VATV.'"

These fifth graders are studying the U.S. Civil War, using the writing process, and exploring the power of digital videos in a project that marries content, writing skills, and technology. Using digital videos as a tool for teaching content ties what could be just a glitzy, new technology directly to the curriculum and increases students' capacity to communicate in this digital age.

Teaching communication used to be simple: teach writing and speaking. But today's students must be able to communicate with pictures, both moving and still; audio; and text. In this article, we show you how to design a series of lessons in which students create digital class videos during the course of content-specific units. Our students used iMovie, but yours could use whatever digital video editing tools you have access to. This project is both content and process driven, using technology as a tool that helps students become literate in this multimedia, digital age.

Digital videos can enrich almost any content area, from literature to science to social studies. Envision interviewing characters from *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, creating a Magic School Bus field trip inside of a molecule, or filming an on-the-scene news report from the forum on the day Julius Caesar was assassinated. Because the "story" of the film is revealed through interviews and news reports, we eliminate the complication of having to act out each event, thus simplifying the production requirements. Elaborate sets, extensive memorization, and complicated actions can just be referred to.

Students plan the project, write the script, film the scenes, and edit the movie. Every student has both a writing job and a production role. The process of creating a digital video parallels the writing process. Both processes are recursive, bouncing students back to the prewriting/preproduction stage when they realize during the editing/postproduction stage that something doesn't work.

Fictional mysteries and Civil War documentaries are projects we have successfully used for the past two years. In the mystery project, student reporters interview suspects, victims, and police detectives to tell the story they devised. In the Civil War project, students reveal the history and conflicting viewpoints of the first battle of Bull Run by interviewing Stonewall Jackson; a Northern foot soldier; spectators from Washington, D.C.; and citizens in Manassas, Virginia. In this article, we focus on the Civil War digital video. We have developed tools to guide students through the creation of their movies and descriptions of the various roles. We have posted these as downloadable PDFs at Tammy Scot's CTIP Home (http://www.k12albemarle.org/ctip/tammy/). You can easily adapt the ideas and format for your own classroom.

Preproduction

Excited voices fill the classroom, heated debates bounce around the tables, and ideas fly as students champion their own concepts of what the class movie should look like. Project directors ping pong around the room, acting as liaisons and mediators between script writers who are intent on making their characters live. Props, costumes, and scene locations are negotiated. What looks at first sight like chaos is really 20+ creative souls campaigning for their visions.

Students have to do a lot of work and planning before they begin filming. The first step is gathering content-specific information. You can lead students through lessons on the

Digital Video Process	Writing Process
Preproduction Gathering content-specific information Concept mapping Teaming, collaboration, and consensus building Scripting Storyboarding	*Prewriting* Researching Brainstorming Webbing Organizing
Production Production lesson Rehearsing Planning and resource management Filming	*Drafting*
Postproduction Rough digital editing Class feedback Continued digital editing Adding additional audio, visuals, stills, graphics Creating credits, titles, and dedications Publishing: distribution and showings	*Editing* Revising Proofreading Peer editing Final editing Publishing

A comparison of the digital video and writing processes.

content, or you can assign them to research specific questions themselves. Students have a high level of concern and engagement because they know they will be using what they learn to write scripts and produce movies.

The next step is creating a story outline. We ask our students to create concept maps, and we provide skeleton maps and planning sheets to get the process underway. We ask them to answer a few guiding questions in planning their movies:

- What facts need to be included?
- What different viewpoints need to be represented?
- How can the emotions and feelings of the people be recreated?

Students brainstorm in small groups to create the plot or to determine the factual information that will be revealed. They create characters, decide on settings, determine the number of interviews, and plan the conclusion.

When the small groups come back to the whole class, it is exciting to see them present, justify, and defend their formulations of how the movie should be structured. The room is abuzz with strong emotions, heated debate, and ultimately, compromise.

After the plan is in place, it is time to assign jobs, build teams, and execute the plan. We assign each student two jobs that capitalize on their strengths: a writing job and a production job. The writing job requires students to develop scripts or storyboards collaboratively. The production jobs include director, floor manager, prop managers, camera operators, editors, and talent.

We group students in teams of two or three to script and then act out a scene. Scripting is where the process of creating a digital video really meshes with the writing process. Students brainstorm, draft, revise, and edit interviews, news reports, and storyboards. They do not simply write their character's part; they collaborate to script the entire scene.

When the small groups come back to the whole class, it is exciting to see them present, justify, and defend their formulations of how the movie should be structured.

We group students very carefully to ensure that they stay on task and work well together. We find that grouping students with similar abilities works best. High and low pairs tend to be taken over by the higher-ability students, except in cases where the reluctant writer in the group has strong verbal abilities, as is the case with many students with learning disabilities.

One group is responsible for creating the storyboard for the entire video. The storyboard is a detailed plan for each scene that lists the talent, setting, props, costumes, mood, and filming effects. The students in this group need to be able to multitask, organize, anticipate conflicts, and troubleshoot problems. They are responsible for facilitating the exchange and coordination of information between all of the scripting groups. This allows the whole class to fine-tune details and ask questions, such as "Which scene should show Stonewall Jackson standing as a wall?" Throughout this stage, the class often meets as a whole to share information, make decisions, and ensure that all the disparate scripts coalesce. This keeps everyone involved and maintains whole-class ownership of the movie.

When all of the rough drafts are written, the talent read their parts to the whole class to gather feedback, verify consistent point of view and voice, and fill in the gaps. This provides powerful lessons in teaching voice and tone. The students who are writing the script for a television newscaster or Northern general use very different language than the ones writing for the Southern foot soldier. A spirit of cooperation pervades as the teacher models how revision is a natural part of the writing process.

Production

Students don oversized borrowed blazers, draw mustaches or add other makeup effects, and pace purposefully, mumbling their lines, as the class gets set to film the first newscast. The cameraperson calls for a sound check as the director gives a last minute pep talk to the nervous actors. The floor manager snaps the clickboard, "Scene 1, Take 1." Production is underway!

Beginning the production phase of the movie is an exciting time for students. This is what they have been writing for! To keep everyone involved, we begin with a production lesson for the whole class where we demonstrate camera use and introduce filming and camera terms such as *camera, sound check, rolling, action, quiet on the set,* and *it's a wrap.* We connect the digital camera to the computer, open the digital video software, and project the camera image onto a large screen. Students take turns using the camera to demonstrate various shots, such as pan, zoom, and close-up.

After the production lesson, it is important to give the talent time to rehearse. Some students get nervous or are unable to memorize their lines, so students make cue cards for each other. The students are very creative, finding ways to place their notes where the camera can't see them or having friends prompt them in pantomime with their lines.

As the talent rehearses, the props people gather their materials, and the floor manager and directors go over the storyboard to plan a filming sequence. Many factors must be taken into consideration: the weather, the

set location, schedule, and appointments. In the case of the Civil War documentary, one of the scenes was filmed on the steep, grassy hill behind the school's soccer field. The students had to arrange to film when no classes were using the playing fields or playgrounds so background noise would not interfere with the filming. Student directors notify the class which scene(s) will be filmed the following day so the talent can be ready and have all of their props at school. A large production timetable that is visible to all is a helpful tool.

"Camera, sound check, rolling, action." The student director is in charge during the filming, but we have found that they need support to find their voice of authority, especially when saying, "Cut!" for the first time. Shooting the scene several times is the norm; this is a surprise to the students who are not accustomed to being able to replay their performance. Students exhibit a range of emotions during the filming. Seemingly extroverted students can get quite shy when being filmed; students who may not always be successful with paper-and-pencil tasks may shine. The directors, floor managers, and editors may be quite surprised at how much they need to juggle.

Postproduction

Four students gather around a computer intent on the screen. "Stop right there, let's delete the rest of that clip," says the girl leaning over the back of the editor's chair.

"Can we slow it down so it looks like the Confederate soldiers are coming over the hill in slow motion?"

"Yeah, and we can add that sad bagpipe music?" adds the serious boy on the left. These students are making creative design choices, a key feature of the postproduction stage.

This phase takes longer than one might initially expect because the students take great care to "get it right." The students need to be taught to use the software. We demonstrate how to get the clips off of the camera and the basic timeline and editing functions. Arranging and editing the clips takes several sessions. We demonstrate the other aspects of the program as needed. Usually they ask for what they want, "Can we tape a voice over this part?" or "How do you add pictures from the Web?" The students are very savvy about what they want the movie to look like, and they are tenacious about working with a section until it is right.

When the film is nearing completion, the editors show a rough-cut to their class. It's amazing what new things they catch when they are seeing the movie fresh through the audience's eyes.

When the movie is in final form, the teacher saves back to the camera and copies it to VHS or DVD for students to take home. Students invite their parents for movie night at Cale where all four fifth-grade classes have an opportunity to share their masterpieces. The pride is palpable. Students whose parents seldom come into the school somehow make it for this night.

Reflections

This project has been good for us as teachers. It has been very energizing to see our students become so totally committed to their movie projects, making careful decisions, working together to iron out conflicts, and writing with their audience foremost in their minds. It is equally satisfying to know that we are accomplishing so many learning goals at once: learning content, developing writing skills, expressing creativity, and mastering technology tools.

We are just beginning to explore this project to its full potential. In the future, we plan to make additional connections with real-world skills and processes. We will provide students with a detailed list of job responsibilities, possibly having them write resumes or letters of application, explaining why they think they are qualified to fill that position. Actors may be assigned "agents" who help them memorize their lines and practice their performances to make them more authentic, more animated. We also hope to take on content other than mysteries and the Civil War. We have already begun brainstorming how the fifth-grade ocean and peace units could become digital video projects.

We feel both proud of and grateful for the success of our digital videos. We are proud of the way we have interwoven 21st-century skills and best teaching practices to allow our students to create a product that has an audience outside the classroom walls. Proud to give writing a new life through collaboration and purposeful revising. Proud of a project that works at so many levels that differentiation is a natural. Proud to tap students' creative energy using technology that is both accessible and affordable. Proud to stand back and become facilitators as our students direct their own learning. And, finally, we feel grateful when we see our students' engagement and hear their enthusiasm for learning.

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