Don't Take it Personal, It's Just Our Bad Ass Ways

–Cynthia Kelley Chun

My interest in project-based curriculum began when I was hired as an English teacher in Waianae High School's Comprehensive Student Alienation Program (CSAP) department. CSAP was composed of two programs—an off-campus program and an on-campus program called Phoenix House. I worked in Phoenix House—an alternative learning center (ALC) for at-risk students. Students placed in the program spend the entire day in the classroom and do not attend classes on the regular school campus. The administration of the school wanted the curriculum in the Phoenix House to be project-based, so I began to explore and experiment with this type of teaching.

During my first year in this position I was also beginning graduate work in curriculum studies at the University of Hawai'i's College of Education, which offered me a perfect opportunity to look into project-based curriculum. My attention was quickly captured by the idea of integrating technology projects into the curriculum for at-risk students. Reluctant learners have been found to be more motivated and engaged in the school curriculum when their work involves hands-on learning in contrast to the lecture format they typically experience at high school.

I also began to look more closely at the kinds of projects that students were doing in the ALC. I found them to be reinforcing the type of career tracking that these students had already experienced throughout their education—namely, skills that would lead them to labor and/or service related careers. I believed it was important that the students were also given opportunities to learn skills related to technology. Teaching these skills in the context of complex projects, as I was discovering in my university courses, would promote higher-order critical thinking skills, provide opportunities for independent and collaborative learning experiences, and involve students in the modes of communication that they would need after high school, whether they chose to pursue higher education or enter the workforce. Without these skills, I felt my students would be more limited in their choices for the future.

The Video Project

As teachers, an important part of planning curriculum is considering the relevance of what we teach our students.

I believe that project-based learning that integrates technology, language arts, and critical media literacy can be a powerful tool for learning. Not only does this kind of work connect students to the curriculum, it also connects them to their community by involving them directly in learning about local issues. I decided, therefore, to focus my curriculum on student video production. I saw it as a way to create a space in the curriculum where the students' culture, experiences, and values could be utilized and validated. It would also be a medium through which student voices could be heard—particularly those whose voices might not otherwise be heard at school. With these objectives in mind, I planned and implemented our first video project. Twenty-three students were involved. They ranged in age from fourteen to seventeen years and their reading ability, based on the San Diego Quick Reading Assessment, spanned a range from fifth-grade to tenth-grade levels.

I began the project by teaching several mini-lessons to the students on such topics as camera shots, the mechanics of the camera and tripod, storyboarding, and the video genres of newscasts and documentaries. Students worked in groups of three to six. Their first assignment was to create a video on some aspect of the CSAP program. I intentionally left this assignment open to see what the students would come up with on their own.

The first few days of the video unit was taken up with brainstorming ideas. Students were required to write down these ideas and then create their storyboards. After this, I arranged to meet each group in conference to go over their storyboard before they could check out a camera and tripod. The learning objectives for this part of the unit included collaboration, problem solving, and language arts skills.

During the course of this project I recorded my thoughts and observations regarding the students and the work they were doing. In the group planning and storyboarding segment I noted that several students who were usually reluctant to attempt any sort of writing assignment were working diligently on their storyboards.

The next part of the video unit was the actual filming. The students were very engaged and motivated during this period. They eagerly awaited the return of the cameras and would reprimand groups who returned them late (there

were only two cameras available for five groups). Another thing I noted was that the students needed very little teacher assistance, and they worked very responsibly with the cameras. I didn't have to remind them to stay on task, finish their work, remember instructions, and adhere to due dates.

After shooting the video, the next week was spent in the high school's main computer lab, editing the videos using Avid Cinema. This was a very exciting time. I brought them up to the lab, one group at a time and gave the students a handout on Avid Cinema. I covered the basics of importing shots, editing and rearranging the shots, and adding transitions, titles, narration, and background music.

During the editing process, I observed that the groups needed very little assistance with the software program and that they learned much faster than I had! Additionally, I was amazed at the amount of time and effort the students were willing to put into finishing their videos. One student commented, as he worked on details of editing his group's video for the third day, "I better get an 'A ' on this. I can't remember when I ever put this much work into something!" The group on the computer next to him chimed in, "Yeah miss, we worked on this all week. Hope we' re getting 'A's' too." The teacher who ran the computer lab also took me aside one day to tell me how impressed she was with my students. She said that she appreciated how hard they worked on their projects and how well they worked together. In addition, she said that she was going to encourage the regular classroom teachers to include video projects in their curriculum, as she saw how motivating it was for my students.

The final part of this unit was the viewing of the videos in class. Students were given an evaluation handout to complete after each video was presented. I was impressed by the excitement and engagement shown by the students. They literally jumped up and moved the desks closer to the television set, trying to get a seat up front with the best view. I was somewhat surprised by this behavior. We often ask the students to move about the room for various learning activities, however they usually need to be asked several times, and even then many of them would grumble and complain about having to move.

During the written evaluation segment following each of the videos, I noticed another major difference in the students' behaviors. From the first video to the last, the students filled out the evaluation forms with great care. They didn't utter a word. Each student performed this task with the seriousness of professionals who are confident in their ability to offer

constructive critiques of video. Would they have been as comfortable in peer-reviewing each other's written works in a writer's workshop?

The Student Videos

I must admit to feeling some ambivalence over the students' final video products. I had allowed them a lot of latitude in creating their videos because I wanted to provide an opportunity for self-expression and student voice. However, I was now questioning some of the content, particularly the music that was used. Although popular with the students, some of the songs contained questionable lyrics, at least according to my "teacher" standards. Were the students testing me? In considering this, it was hard for me to equate these concerns with the time, hard work, concentration, and pride that I had observed in the students as they worked on their projects. In thinking more about this issue, and having talked it over with others, I realize that the aspect of 'audience' was a key factor here. The students knew they were making videos for the class, not for parents, administrators, or the public, and this made a difference. The video project had given them a chance to "be cool" in the eyes of their classmates, and they created products that were sure to be peer-pleasing.

It is also interesting to note that during the video workshops, I observed over twenty different CD's being passed around among the groups. Several different songs were listened to and considered; yet, the song "Last Resort" by Papa Roach ended up on three of the five final videos. Perhaps it was just because the song was popular and the students liked it; but, as I will discuss below, I believe the students thought the song had the right "feel" for what they were trying to convey. Rather than using the lyrics to test me, I think they included the music and words that they liked best, and that they felt would best fit the videos.

A Closer Look

Group one was composed of four students—two males and two females. They created a video about two other school projects, the fishpond and the park beautification projects. Their video included interviews with teachers and students who were involved in these projects. During the week in the computer lab they spent a great deal of time editing their video and putting their final version together. Even when they were close to producing a final draft, two of the group members came back and spent several more hours timing the music into the video.

On the day we showed the videos for peer evaluation eighteen students were present in class. In her self-evaluation, one of the students from group one wrote that this was the first video she "really did on her own." Throughout the screening of the videos, other students made similar comments. Because the students were given a choice in the content and creative style of their videos, I noted a growing sense of student pride and ownership in their learning.

The music used in the videos came up in several other student comments. In fact, sixteen of the eighteen students responded that they liked the rap music in this video. Comments about the music included adjectives such as "killah," "good," and "great." Other students mentioned how well they thought the music matched the video. Despite the fact that some of the lyrics had been somewhat offensive to me, the music was definitely a bit hit with the students.

After reading the evaluations, I returned to the video to listen more carefully to the words in the song that was used, "Last Resort," by Papa Roach.

> *Cut my life into pieces*
> *This is my last resort*
> *Suffocation, no breathing*
> *Don't give a f... if I cut my arm bleeding*
> *This is my last resort*
> *Do you even care if I die bleeding?*
> *Would it be wrong, would it be right*
> *If I took my life tonight?*
> *Chances are that I might*
> *Am I contemplating suicide*
> *Cause I'm losing my sight, losing my mind?*
> *Wish somebody would tell me I'm fine*
> *Losing my sight, losing my mind*
> *Wish somebody would tell me I'm fine*
> *Nothing is fine, nothing is fine*
> *I'm running out of time*
> *I'm running out of time*

In thinking about these lyrics, it was apparent that there were many issues that they raised that were relevant to the students' lives. Suicidal thoughts, depression, and self-mutilation by cutting one's arms were things that came up often in the lives of the students in our program. This song gave voice to these issues. I also considered the fact that these students chose to make a video about the fishpond and park beautification projects. They enjoyed working on these projects and they also liked the teachers facilitating them. The video shots show fragile, seedling plants protected by lava rock enclosures, and a smiling teacher talking to them about the CSAP program. Perhaps they saw the music alluding to the program as their "last resort," where they hoped somebody would show them that they *"are fine."* Another point of some significance given the title of the song is that the alternative-learning classroom, the ALC, also goes by another name with the students— the "Assholes Last Chance."

Group two was composed of three male students. They came into the program with a history of fighting on campus. Their families were worried about their safety at school and part of the reason they were put into the program was to keep them physically safe and out of trouble. Two of the three boys in this group were also lagging academically and had histories of failing grades.

Group two asked permission to check out the video equipment overnight because they wanted to make a video about what they liked to do after school. Their storyboard showed shots of motorcycle dirt bike riding and also included many shots from a farm that raised fighting roosters. Cockfighting is a popular part of the culture in the community.

During the week in the computer lab the boys spent a great deal of time editing their video and laying music soundtracks. I was impressed by their efforts, and I think they even surprised themselves. One of the boys commented that he didn't remember ever working so hard on anything in school before.

As the boys worked on their video, it began to draw a great deal of attention. Students would often bring their chairs around to watch as the raw footage was edited into the video. I noticed several students who were not from the program, but were working in the computer lab, stop what they were doing to watch the scenes of fighting roosters and dirt bike stunts.

My own first impression of the video was favorable. The variety of shots, the angles of the shots and the timing of the editing with the music all worked well together. Group two's video also used the song "Last Resort" in the opening shot and in later shots at the rooster farm.

Like last group, only one student in group two was present on the day that the video was evaluated. On his self-evaluation, he wrote that he "liked everything" about it, and he wished "it was longer." His response was similar to several of the others—they wished there was more. What a

compliment to any video! We can all remember a time when we didn't want a good book, a particular movie, or a pleasurable moment to end; but how often do these moments occur in the school curriculum?

The group two video starts with the lyrics of Papa Roach, *"Cut my life into pieces…"* There is a long pan shot of a farm that raises fighting roosters. As the camera pans the area, the viewers can see that the roosters are chained to two-sided teepee-like structures; these structures are shot from the side, so the viewer can see through them. There are at least ten rows of these structures and each row goes on for the entire length of the shot. As the title slips off the bottom of the screen, there is a cut to a close-up of a rooster, chained to a structure.

The last half of group two's video was taped in Wai'anae Valley and has shots of dirt bike riding. Once again, the technical proficiency of the shots is remarkable. The students had chosen low-angle shots that made the motorcycle and its rider appear larger than life. The shots concentrated on the motorcycle going airborne, over and over. For this portion of the video, the students had chosen a different rap song. As the motorcycle flies into the air we hear the words, *"I'm dropping out of high school straight into the pros."*

I think this line captures much of what the boys were thinking. They might not have been doing well in school; but in their world, they were skilled and talented. By incorporating their personal lives into the project (cock fighting and dirt-biking) they were able to share how talented they were in areas that the other students also knew about and respected. In the process, the students worked hard and demonstrated the considerable knowledge they had gained about video filming and editing. The final product was a slick, hip piece that showed skill and creativity. It was appreciated and enjoyed by students and teachers alike.

The last shot is a low-angle shot of the rider on the motorcycle, wearing a helmet and gloves and looking invincible and anonymous. The end title scrolls from the bottom to the top, all in capital letters, *"DON'T TAKE IT PERSONAL, IT'S JUST OUR BAD ASS WAYS…"*

This video demonstrated the value of connecting students' in-school and out-of-school cultures and experiences. While meeting the objectives of the video curriculum (integrating technology and language arts), the students created a video that completely engaged them in their learning, and also proved to be a favorite of their classmates. This might not have occurred if I had placed restrictions on the content, or if I had not trusted the boys with the camera equipment overnight—an action that raised the eyebrows of a number of my colleagues.

Discussion

Students today, especially those who are "at-risk", need opportunities to be "experts," and to bring their pre-existing knowledge, interests, and life experiences into the curriculum. In this project, video production provided students with this opportunity while also engaging them in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Students have a great deal of experience with popular culture and the media. Based on the knowledge they already possessed about television and movies, the students were able to quickly become experts in the video production project. The students started with what they knew, and grew as learners and communicators. Ultimately, all of the students were able to produce a video "text;" a means of communicating that incorporated speaking, music, and electronic images.

The students worked cooperatively throughout the project, and with a few basic mini-lessons and instructions, they were able to take control of the direction of their projects. It did not take very long for the students to take what I had taught them and move on independently to higher levels of expertise. Often the students asked questions that I could not answer immediately, but they proved capable problem-solvers in working with me to find an answer.

I believe that the desire to produce a video of high quality to share in class with their peers motivated the students to achieve and succeed. Along with the hard work, the video project brought us many smiles and moments of light-hearted fun. Our sense of a classroom community was strengthened as the students worked together to help and support one another. Throughout the process, I noticed a growing sense of student pride and ownership in their learning. The freedom to bring their culture and experiences into the curriculum validated what the students knew, what they thought and felt, and what they valued.