Sex, literacy and videotape: Learning, identity and language development through documentary production with "overage" students

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ABSTRACT: This case study examines the learning, identity and language development experienced by "overage" 8th-grade students who have been left behind two or more years in their New York City middle school and are participating in an extended-day video documentary program. The students practise a range of literacy skills naturally embedded in the documentary production process. The topic they have chosen to explore through their video project is teen sex. This program seeks to create a vibrant and active learning space that is planting the seeds for what might grow into a sustained program of youth-generated media in their school. Observing and listening in on the students in this case illustrates practical applications of learning theories including multiple discourses, double abstraction, situated learning, and cognitive apprenticeships and proposes new possibilities for literacy development with low-performing students as well as the kind of hybrid informal/formal learning environments needed to support such development.

KEYWORDS: Documentary production, cognitive apprenticeship, discourses, literacy, situated learning, youth media

There is a good amount of banter back and forth as the students move their desks closer together at this New York City high school. They are now next to and facing each other. Some cluster around a laptop where they are revising a survey they plan to print out and distribute to their fellow students. Others hunch over a large poster paper with marker in hand, scrawling interview questions to ask a school social worker and a student's mother. Another writes an email requesting an interview with a professor of adolescent sex and family health at a local university hospital. Each of these activities is part of an iterative, collaborative and inquiry-driven process that over time will result in a video documentary they planned, produced, edited and screened for their school community. The subject they have chosen to investigate is teen sex. This afternoon, each activity the students are engaged in requires them to practise – with a purpose and for an audience – a different literacy, a different technology, and a different discourse.

Just like the rest of the students served by this high school opened in the fall of 2009, these eight students are all considered "overage" 8th-graders who fell two or more years behind in their middle school and were at risk of dropping out. Some are English language learners; others have different emotional and special learning needs. They choose to stay after school until 6pm twice a week to work on their video project. They are supervised by a teacher and a community-based technology arts assistant, both of whom are being trained and coached by a media educator.

Like all forms of media used in school settings, video production can serve a multitude of purposes: documentation, demonstration, creative expression, entertainment, marketing and more. In this case, the high-school principal invited the

Educational Video Center (EVC)[1] to work with some of her staff because of her interest in using video production as a tool to build students' literacy and critical thinking skills in ways that were relevant to her students' lives. The principal chose to offer video production as an innovative in-school and after-school program specifically to engage and build students' critical literacy skills. While the students spend most of their time in the building, they occasionally go out "on shoots" in the local Manhattan neighbourhood. Crossing borders in this way helps create the feel and culture of a vibrant, hybrid (part formal school/part informal community) learning space that is planting the seeds for what might grow into a sustained program of youth-generated media in their school.

Observing the students at work, this author will examine the practice and the underlying learning theories involved in this student documentary project including multiple discourses, double abstraction, situated learning and cognitive apprenticeships. We hope this will inform new possibilities for learning, identity and literacy development with low-performing students as well as the kind of learning environments needed to support such development.

FACILITATING DOCUMENTARY INQUIRY

Over the course of the 2009/10 school year, EVC provided the teachers with experiential professional development workshops, curriculum, and technical assistance in the purchase of camera equipment and editing software. This was followed by on-site coaching and planning twice a week, where some lessons were modeled and others co-taught. Over time, the goal has been to build the school's capacity to integrate video production into its academic curriculum and to establish an after-school, student video documentary program as media-based strategies for developing more students' literacy and critical thinking skills.

EVC is a non-governmental, media education organisation based in New York City that has provided documentary workshops for students and educators since 1984. The structure of EVC's pedagogical model as outlined in the "Youth Powered Video" curriculum follows the basic stages of a documentary production: research, production, logging and editing. However, the curriculum is not only a guide for creating a compelling documentary *product*; it is also a method for exploiting the collaborative production *process* for the rich and varied literacy and learning opportunities that emerge through it (Baudenbacher & Goodman, 2006). For example, as one teacher pointed out, the curriculum met most of the school's stated literacy standards for proficient readers, including pedagogical strategies for visualising, asking questions, making predictions, synthesising, summarising, determining importance, making inferences and scaffolding. Parallels also abound between video production and the writing process of telling a story, keeping a diary or making a persuasive argument.

Facilitating the documentary inquiry production process, teachers will bring their students through the following steps in a collapsed or extended version, depending on the amount of time available: selecting the main story or line of inquiry that will guide

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[1] www.EVC.org

their documentary; developing an outline of interview subjects and other sources to research; creating a storyboard of shots; generating lists of main questions and follow-up questions; critiquing interviews; logging footage; determining the "strong" quotes, images, and main ideas from the footage; developing rough edit plans; writing and recording narration; composing music, critiquing rough edits; revising and creating a final edit that tells a compelling story with a beginning, middle and end. Students use journals throughout to capture their experience, reflect on their learning, jot new questions, occasionally vent about other group members, and sometimes just to doodle.

TALKING, WRITING AND DOUBLE ABSTRACTIONS

Now let's return to the group of students at work on their documentary. The three groups are all working on a typical school activity: writing. Yet here, the content, purpose, and social context of their writing differ from most of the writing they are asked to do in their more standardised, test-driven classes. And they are highly engaged in their work at hand.

Becoming actively engaged in their writing is a significant achievement for these students. This is the case particularly since their histories of repeated academic failure so often result in identity formation associated with being the "bad student" or the "slow reader." Engagement leading to successful practice, no matter how small or tentative, can go a long way in repairing damaged identities as learners.

While the students' writing in this case is limited to the discourses and conventions of documentary production (as compared to other school forms of writing such as essays and book reports), the collective thinking and questioning it generates will lay the foundation on which they will build the rest of the project. Participating in this process, the students are trying on a new authorial identity as documentary-maker. As Jean Lave's situated cognitive theory describes it, "learning is not best judged by a change in mind (the traditional school measure), but by 'changing participation in changing practices.' Most important, learning is a change not just in practice, but in *identity…*" (as cited in Gee, 2003, pp.189-90).

Looking more closely at their writing and changing participation, we must first ask why these reluctant writers are now motivated to participate when writing is embedded in the video project.This unexpected change in learning behaviour warrants closer investigation.

There is no question that writing is a tough skill to master. As Vygotsky described it, writing is a monologous act: "a conversation with a blank sheet of paper…speech in thought and image only", doubly abstracted from both the sound, rhythm and music of spoken words and from a real person with which to engage in dialogue (1986, p. 181). While each group of students is writing for different purposes and audiences, and using different modes of communication and discourses, the media tools and the *social context* in which they are learning all work on various levels to make Vygotsky's abstractions more concrete.

Firstly, they are writing to audiences of real people they actually know (except for the family health professional). They can imagine a dialogue with them. Their writing is addressed to their immediate social community and extended community. Secondly, they are writing with a purpose and tangible outcome in mind: to inspire action. In particular, they expect action, with results they can see for themselves. Their writing will lead to new statistical information from their intended student audience, video interviews with adults, and possibly changed attitudes and behaviour in much larger audiences when their video is screened in their school and community.

Thirdly, in this case, writing is a deeply social affair, unlike solitary tasks that students are most commonly assigned to undertake in silence. Their writing is supported, accompanied and amplified by speech. There is a constant flow of talk bubbling up surrounding all the writing they are doing. Often with humour and sometime more seriousness, their questions, critiques and suggestions provide an intellectual scaffold that fosters the social distribution of knowledge. It helps them to collectively solve problems, make sense of the words they are writing, explore the immediate purposes and larger meanings they carry in their own lives and the lives of their friends, and the actions they hope to inspire in their audiences. What follows is an account of some of this rich and passionate talk.

The students decide that the ideas and opinions their fellow classmates hold about teenage sex need to be at the heart of their documentary. But they don't believe that they will be able to capture a reliable and representative sample by interviewing students on camera owing to the sensitive and personal nature of the subject matter. Instead, they plan to effectively incorporate student views into their documentary by conducting an anonymous survey.

The group creating the survey understands that it will be printed out and distributed to all of the students in the school. Their goal is for as many students as possible to fill it out and turn it back in so they can have accurate information to include in their documentary. They are thinking as researchers as they seek to gather accurate information, and then create and disseminate new knowledge to the public. Given the private nature of the questions being asked, they are concerned that the students: 1) believe the questions are relevant; 2) clearly understand their intended meaning; 3) feel secure in their anonymity; 4) will answer all questions; 5) will answer all questions honestly; and 6) will return the survey in the survey box.

By way of example, there was some discussion concerning the question "Were you pressured to have sex?" One girl thought this was an important question and said, "I feel a lot of people will answer 'yes' to this one. You know why? Cause I have a LOT of friends like that." There was also debate about the wording of the last question. In a draft of the survey it reads: "Do you think if teens waited to have sex, will have less STI/STD? Yes [ ] No [ ]" When they first wrote the question about "STI's" (sexually transmitted infections) one student thought most of the other students wouldn't know what that was. So she recommended that they add the more commonly known "STD" (sexually transmitted diseases). To address the problem of students feeling they might be identified, they wrote the following two sentences at the top of the survey: "This is a confidential survey designed to get factual information on teen behaviour. Please answer it honestly, it would be anonymous."

There was also a heated discussion about how to make sure students felt safe in returning their surveys. When one student suggested they keep the filled-in surveys in a shoe-box, others were against the idea since they said it could be opened. The first student then decided it would be better to put tape around it and then decorate it so it looked more presentable while still ensuring additional security.

They also gave a lot of thought to the order of their questions. One male student proposed that one of the first questions should be: "Have you had sex under the influence of drugs or alcohol?" The girl typing the questions scolded him playfully with a broad smile, "No, you're going too fast! You have to slow down, man. Don't rush it. Sex questions you always leave for the end. You sugar-coat them at first. And then you crack them!" And so the first questions they agreed on addressed questions such as whether students have ever been to a club, used fake ID, or ever used drugs.

Towards the end of the survey they put a question about oral sex. This caused the biggest stir. The first version of the question was simply: "Have you ever had oral sex?" There were some attempts to reword it: "Have you ever gave oral sex?" "Have you ever given sex?" Then the supervising teacher urged them to rewrite it, since she said it was "too probing." (Other questions she said should be "knocked off" the survey such as whether students had ever had an abortion.) Some discussion ensued as to whether oral sex was actually sex. One student felt no one would answer the question. So after several attempts at rewording so students would understand and respond, they changed the question to: "Do you consider oral sex, sex?"

In contrast, writing the questions for the interviews with the student's mother and school social worker ended up being a more straightforward process. Generated by the group and recorded on poster paper, they were then to be typed up and read on video. The advantage and the challenge was that the student was going to bring the camera home and interview her own mother there. There was still a clear attention to audience and discourse. In response to one question: "How would you feel if your teen was having sex?" another student cautioned, "With family members, you have to be delicate." The student explained that her mother would probably tell her story of being a teen parent. This led to discussion among the girls of when their parents told them about "the birds and the bees" and the rules and restrictions that were imposed once they turned 13.

The third activity was writing to request an "expert" interview. The students had first written to a Rutgers University-sponsored youth magazine devoted to adolescent sexuality, located in New Jersey (USA). A student said how excited he was that they had actually sent him a response. He went on to explain, "Sadly they can't come but they gave us an alternative to contact in the New York area. (This part of New Jersey is approximately a two-hour train ride from the school). At least they gave us something to hope onto. They didn't leave us with no hope. They told me to contact the former Vice President of Planned Parenthood."

He then began the process of responding, first asking his teacher, "What should be the subject? And who should I sent it to?" He was advised to send messages to all three people who were recommended, and to mention the doctor from Rutgers University in the second sentence. She explained that it would help make his request more legitimate and might help get a response if they knew each other. Misunderstanding

her email, "Sure. When were you hoping to do this? Best _____ ", he wrote that it would be best if she was the one that they interviewed. His teacher explained that "Best" is a kind of customary polite closing to a letter, short for "Best regards" like writing "Sincerely yours." Embarrassed at not knowing the conventions of business letter writing, he quickly deleted that sentence and sent off the message.

Expecting that a response might take days or weeks or not come at all, he was advised to follow up with an email and call them in a couple of days. "The squeaky wheel gets the oil." He didn't know what this meant, but when he was told you have to make some noise and speak up to get attention, he agreed. He said that reminded him of a story in the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) where Malcolm X "told a story about getting beat by his mother. His brother just took it, but he made noise and shouted in public and got her to feel so embarrassed that she stopped."

Looking back at his computer screen, he said excitedly: "Wow, they just emailed me back! That's the fasted response I ever saw! Two minutes. They said 'Yes!' When do we want to do it?" The teacher and he looked at the calendar and agreed on the best date, time and place. He sat back down to write a response. When the teacher asked to see what he wrote, he said: "I already sent it." With a rather surprised look she said, "You did? Oh, my." Then catching herself she said, "That's ok. These are the steps toward progress."

MULTIPLE DISCOURSES

According to Gee, discourses are:

> ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or "types of people") by specific *groups of people*… They are "ways of being in the world"; they are forms of life (1996, p. viii).

Gee argues thatlanguage and literacy make no sense outside of the notion of discourse. "Literacy practices are almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values, and beliefs" (1996, p. 41).

But schools too often continue to teach literacy as a decontextualised, individual psychological process involving the ability to de-code text (reading) and to encode language in visual form (writing). In this way, words and meanings are cut off from embodied action and the learner's experience. In this case, the students were aware of the practical applications of language usage and the different conventions they required. As one student commented on his experience writing emails to the youth magazine and sexual health experts, "I've never written messages to companies before. It helps me send emails to people for professional purposes." In his mind, anyone connected to a hospital or university was considered part of a company. He was aware that by learning the formal and informal language of writing emails for professional purposes, he was crossing boundaries and extending his reach beyond his school and peers. In the process, he was mastering and navigating other discourses.

In every case, the information they gave and questions they asked all led to some kind of action. The writing had a purpose and public audience, whether to gather a survey of sexual attitudes and behaviour in their school, a parent's point of view on teen sex, or an interview with a sexual health expert. In one case, the student would translate her writing into verbal speech as she conducted an interview with her mother that would then be recorded on videotape as a visual and aural event, and then edited. The survey questions would remain a print document to be tallied, summarized and reported on their video. They had not yet determined its final form, whether as narration, graphics, or both.

APPRENTICED LEARNING AND IDENTITY

With documentary-making as both the central discipline of study and the end-product of work, the strategies and structure of this class followed many elements of the apprenticeship model of work. In his study of apprenticeship as situated learning, Halpern describes it as a set of organised activities centred around a "production cycle that creates a frame for an expanding set of task and skills [which include] a conceptualization phase, design phase, production phase feedback and revision and final production or performance" (2008, p. 25). In contrast to the school culture of binary testing that either rewards the right answers or punishes the wrong ones, the apprenticeship environment engages students in project work where they "face open-ended problems and shifting variables…marked by real-world constraints" and that affords them "…plentiful opportunities for the trial and error, practice and experimentation that solidify emergent abilities" (2008, pp. 23, 21).

However, there are also aspects of the students' video experience that would fall outside an apprenticeship experience. For example, the students did not observe and work alongside assisting a master documentary producer with the use of particular tools and techniques. Rather, they were guided and facilitated by a teacher who was in turn coached by a media educator, both of whom modelled various strategies and techniques. But the production was for the students to make as their own. This process of coaching and modeling might more closely fit the learning model described by media education researcher Kathleen Tyner (1998) as a cognitive apprenticeship where the teacher creates

> learning environments along the lines of those used in traditional apprenticeships and then [exploits] them for the explicit purposes of strengthening cognitive activities.…Cognitive apprenticeships play an important role in language and literacy learning because discourses are not mastered through overt instruction, but through a kind of apprenticeship… (p. 174).

As a cognitive apprenticeship, this documentary workshop was distinct from what traditionally takes place in school for several reasons. Firstly, the content of study – teen sex – was *chosen by the students,* not their teacher or the school district as a mandated course. Although it was not without some teacher constraints (as noted above), as Hull notes in her study of afterschool digital media projects, *this freedom to choose* was an important element of this model of learning (Hull, Kenney, Marple, & Forsman-Schneider, 2006, p. 31).

Secondly, this approach promoted the *acquisition* of language skills, not through formal instruction as much as through the exposure to models and through the process of trial and error, and practice. Tyner notes,

> It happens in natural settings which are meaningful and functional in the sense that acquirers know that they need to acquire the thing they are exposed to in order to function and they in fact want to so function. This is how people come to control their first language (1998, p. 174).

Thirdly, students were engaged in the social sharing of information and knowledge-building that drew upon a diverse range of thinking tools and technologies which included video cameras, email, internet, surveys, family members, community, health experts, fellow students and their own lived experience. They learned to work with, learn from, and give back to the larger social community. As opposed to the learning and knowledge production process in most professional settings where professionals consult a wide array of texts and other colleagues, schools too often tend to separate students from their thought partners and technologies and test them on what they know and can do by themselves isolated from social networks and participatory cultures.

When these elements are present and students participate in a cognitive apprenticeship over a long enough period of time, then deeper learning begins to take place. Students have the opportunity to repeatedly practise and become skilled in a range of literacies that otherwise wouldn't be possible; they gradually independently master more and more sophisticated tasks; they find great pleasure and joy in the experience of learning and creating for public audiences; they form an identity associated with the activity they so enjoy doing.

In many ways, those elements of the documentary program that are most attractive for students – such as the social context of learning, the freedom to leave the school, and the freedom to report on controversial topics – are the elements that run against the grain of most school bureaucratic structures and disciplinary practices. The challenge then is to align school structures and teachers' pedagogy as was done in this case, so as to create these in-between, hybrid, media-based learning experiences that promote situated academic and literacy skill-building. They may be special electives, or extended day programs. Combining the pedagogical structure of a cognitive apprenticeship with the agency of youth driven documentary will create the conditions for students to practise a range of literacies and discourses, and develop new academic identities of purpose and promise.

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Weeks later, the group embarked on their "shoot" with the professor of clinical population and family health. They walked only seven blocks from their school to get to her office, but this complex of large, university hospital buildings and sidewalks crowded with doctors, researchers and graduate students might have been a world away from the Dominican bodegas in their neighbourhood. Despite the differences, the people and environment of the wood-paneled, family health research and education offices were inviting. Except for momentarily losing the paper with the interview questions on it, everything went well. The professor even proposed that they

screen their final documentary for her graduate students at the university. Being reminded to watch their language, hats and cell phones, they successfully crossed borders and discourses and extended their horizon of possibility.

Now, walking down the street with camera, tripod, headphones and most importantly their recorded mini-dv tape in hand, the students voiced a sense of pride and accomplishment at having gotten answers to their questions from such an important person. (They found out the professor had previously been quoted in the *New York Times* and had appeared on "The Daily Show.") This pride was then tempered with self-critique at stumbling over some words during the interview. But self-critique soon melted away into prankish humour when they came up with the idea to edit in a clip of the professor's humorous "Daily Show" appearance in their "blooper" section of the video to surprise their new health professional friend at the screening. Talking and walking with their teacher, they were thinking, acting, and well on their way to writing new identities for themselves as creative documentary-producers.

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APPENDIX

Documentary film crew