

The Personal Video Essay: Multimodal Composition in English 202H
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Introduction

English 202 courses fulfill three GWS credits and serve as an introduction to writing in the disciplines. While all 202 courses are tasked with professionalizing students and introducing them to discipline-specific resumes, job and internship applications, and statements of purpose, English 202H: Honors Writing trains honors students from all majors to represent themselves as emerging members of multiple disciplines. Print-based expertise is often insufficient preparation. Today's internships, fellowships, graduate schools, and entry-level positions seek applicants who can communicate in multiple media. I therefore aimed to include a Personal Video Essay in English 202H. A digital version of the personal statement characteristic of admissions essays and scholarship applications, this assignment took inspiration from an eclectic range of sources, including Ohio State University's [Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives](#), journalist Nicholas Kristof's "[Win a Trip](#)" contest, and 2001 film *Legally Blonde*'s Harvard Law School [application video](#). Learning objectives included students' acquisition of practical video production skills, development of theoretical knowledge about communicating in multiple media, and enhanced sense of professional self-representation. The project emphasized the rhetorical dimension of video production by stressing the strategic and intentional use of sound, image, and multimodal communication tools.

Project Design

Through consultation with the Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT) in Fall 2014, I determined that teaching video production through iMovie would pose a solution for the print/multimodal communication gap in English 202H. Project Manager Mary Ann Mengel and I subsequently developed a project that involved producing a video *about* video production. We also planned for Media Commons support for teaching Personal Video Essays in English 202H. Project milestones were as follows:

Date	Project Milestones
Summer 2015	Developed proficiency with iMovie software by creating an instructional video about making video essays, which included a sample Personal Video Essay. Involved extensive consultation with and support from Mary Ann Mengel. Also consulted Linda.com iMovie tutorials. Scheduled Spring 2016 English 202H sessions with regional Media Commons Consultant Carla Rapp.
Fall 2015	Planned for English 202H, including syllabus and assignment sequence. Consulted with Mary Ann Mengel to draft and revise project assessment tool consisting of Pre-Test and Post-Test surveying students' perception of instructional video as a teaching tool and existing vs. acquired understanding of multimodal composition.

January 2016	Administered Pre-Test (prior to introducing assignment and screening Instructional Video).
January – March 2016	With Media Commons support from Carla Rapp, students completed a series of assignments, culminating in creation of individual Personal Video Essays, which were saved as .mp4s and uploaded to Box @ PSU. Assignments included creating a storyboard, shooting and editing draft video footage, completing various reflective writing assignments, participating in peer review sessions on work in progress, and developing a transmittal memo to accompany the video submission. Students also completed assigned readings about multimedia rhetoric. Some students chose to complete an optional revision of the Personal Video Essay.
April 2016	Administered Post-Test (after submission of all Personal Video Essays).
May 2016	Analyzed and interpreted assessment results.

Learning Outcomes

The project assessment involved a Pre-Test/Post-Test to gauge students' perceptions of instructional video as a teaching tool and their perceived understanding of the affordances of visuals, sound, and multimodality. The instrument used a Likert Scale ranging from 1 (Novice) to 5 (Expert). Both surveys were anonymously administered to 12 of the 13 enrolled students; based on attendance logs, however, these were not the same 12 students. The following charts compare the mean scores for the Pre-Test and Post-Test.

Instructional Video as a Teaching Tool	Pre-Test	Post-Test
1. Instructional video is an effective teaching tool.	4.25	4.25
2. Instructional video is compatible with my learning style.	3.916667	3.75
3. A strategic combination of audio and visual elements in a video-based presentation can communicate a message in greater depth than text alone.	4.583333	4.333333
4. A strategic combination of audio and visual elements in a video-based presentation can communicate a message in greater depth than an oral presentation alone.	4.333333	4.083333
5. Watching an instructional video enhanced my learning experience.	N/A	3.666667
6. Watching an example of a Personal Video Essay increased my motivation to create my own Personal Video Essay.	N/A	3.166667

Visuals	Pre-Test	Post-Test
1. I feel confident in my ability to recognize varying shot types (i.e., establishing shot, long shot, close-up) and camera angles and to identify how they contribute to or enhance communication.	2.416667	3.909091
2. I feel confident in my ability to use varying shot types (i.e., establishing shot, long shot, close-up) and camera angles to contribute to or enhance communication.	2.333333	3.636364
3. I feel confident in my ability to recognize varying video effects (i.e., zoom, fade, transitions, filters, Ken Burns effect) and to identify how they contribute to or enhance communication.	2.916667	4.454545
4. I feel confident in my ability to use varying video effects (i.e., zoom, fade, transitions, filters, Ken Burns effect) to contribute to or enhance communication.	2.75	4
5. I feel confident in my ability to recognize connections among visuals from scene to scene and throughout a project and to identify how they contribute to or enhance communication.	3.166667	4.181818
6. I feel confident in my ability to create connections among visuals from scene to scene and throughout a project to contribute to or enhance communication.	3.083333	3.909091

Sound	Pre-Test	Post-Test
1. I feel confident in my ability to recognize how the use and layering of (non-musical) sound effects (i.e., voice over, ambient noise, Foley effects) contribute to or enhance communication.	3.083333	3.833333
2. I feel confident in my ability to use and layer (non-musical) sound effects (i.e., voice over, ambient noise, Foley effects) to contribute to or enhance communication.	2.666667	3.666667
3. I feel confident in my ability to recognize how the use and layering of musical effects (i.e., musical motif, sound bridge, rhythm) contribute to or enhance communication.	3.166667	3.916667
4. I feel confident in my ability to use and layer musical effects (i.e., musical motif, sound bridge, rhythm) to contribute to or enhance communication.	3	3.916667
5. I feel confident in my ability to recognize how connections among sound effects and musical effects from scene to scene and throughout a project enhance communication.	3.166667	3.833333
6. I feel confident in my ability to create connections among sound effects and musical effects from scene to scene and throughout a project to enhance communication.	3.083333	3.5

Multimodality	Pre-Test	Post-Test
1. I feel confident in my ability to recognize how visual and audio effects can be combined to enhance communication.	3.666667	4.333333
2. I feel confident in my ability to combine visual and audio effects to enhance communication.	2.833333	3.916667
3. I feel confident in my ability to recognize how key points or ideas can be reinforced, highlighted, or emphasized through a combination of visual and audio effects.	3.5	4.083333
4. I feel confident in my ability to reinforce, highlight, or emphasize key points or ideas through a combination of visual and audio effects.	2.833333	3.916667
5. I feel confident in my ability to recognize how a combination of visual and audio effects can challenge, contradict, or question selected points or ideas.	3.416667	4
6. I feel confident in my ability to combine visual and audio effects to challenge, contradict, or question selected points or ideas.	2.666667	3.583333
7. I feel confident in my ability to recognize how connections among visual and audio effects from scene to scene and throughout a project can enhance communication.	3.666667	4
8. I feel confident in my ability to create connections among visual and audio effects from scene to scene and throughout a project to enhance communication.	2.833333	3.666667

Each section of the assessment (both Pre-Test and Post-Test) instructed students to “Reflect on your answers, supporting them with examples/experiences where appropriate.”

Summary of Pre-Test Comments
<p>Students expressed some hesitation about the value of instructional video compared to live instruction. Some noted the benefits of having a range of learning tools, including videos.</p> <p>Students expressed a deeper comfort level analyzing videos than producing them. Some students noted previous experience: “I have made iMovies before, therefore I know how to incorporate special visual effects (zoom, transitions, fades, etc.)” Conversely, some students noted a lack of experience.</p> <p>Remarks about sound tracked similarly, with some students noting a comfort level from prior experience and others remarking on their lack of experience. One noted that audio editing was very challenging.</p> <p>Comments about multimodality again reiterated students’ collective ability to recognize and analyze techniques, often in contrast to their confidence about producing them: “I understand multimodality, but may not be entirely proficient in creating it through video.”</p>

Summary of Post-Test Comments

Respondents generally supported the efficacy of instructional video while simultaneously expressing a lack of motivation about creating their own videos. Some attributed this hesitation to anxiety about appearing on camera: “I don’t enjoy editing and shooting video of myself.”

Most students noted an increase in their ability to produce and edit visuals. Many described this assignment as “additional practice” for previously acquired skills.

Students’ remarks about producing audio were somewhat less confident than their remarks about visuals. Many students focused on an ability to recognize sound effects rather than produce them: “I learned a lot about sound effects, how to add them, and how they changed the video’s meaning. I’m still a little rough when it comes to adding rhetorical sounds.”

Comments on multimodality were largely positive: “This project helped me learn how to put a video together effectively with layering meaning throughout.”

Discussion

Interestingly, student feedback in the Post-Test indicated a fairly neutral or average stance regarding their motivation to create a Personal Video Essay after viewing my own instructional video. Students’ rating of instructional video as a teaching tool declined slightly in three out of four categories in the Post-Test and remained static in another. While this decline suggests a lack of efficacy in the instructional video, students’ perception of their competencies in the areas of visuals, sound, and multimodality increased markedly, pointing to the project’s overall success in fostering students’ comfort with and understanding of the multiple communicative tools associated with video production.

While students viewed themselves as adept at identifying and appreciating visual, audio, and multimodal effects, both before and after completing the project, they seemed generally more comfortable using visual modalities to make meaning. Several students expressed a hesitancy about the efficacy of their sound editing, with multiple students remarking on their lack of success in this area in the Post-Test. Other notable trends include 1) a general skepticism about instructional video as compared to live instruction, though some students noted that the two could productively complement one another, and 2) a hesitancy or self-consciousness about appearing on camera.

Recommendations

- If using an instructional video, consider providing multiple models of Personal Video Essays within it. Students tended to use my sample Personal Video Essay as a template rather than an example. As a result, videos tended to look very similar to one another (and to mine).
- Engage students in conversations about self-representation that do not involve appearing on camera (or involve limited screen time). Students were collectively anxious about seeing themselves on screen.
- Pair students to allow for reciprocal filming. Many students were limited to filming themselves with stationary cameras, which contributed to a lack of variety in the videos.

- Devote class time to step-by-step instructions about checking out Media Commons equipment, using cameras and tripods, and storing files. Students struggled with some of the practical “how to” aspects of the project.
- Encourage students to use the Media Commons server to store their work, and create opportunities to view their iMovie library of work in progress to allow for more detailed editorial interventions.
- Pace the assignment carefully to allow for shooting and reshooting with multiple checkpoints along the way. Anticipate technical difficulty and be compassionate (yet still rigorous) about how students’ schedules impact their ability to access Media Commons equipment and software.

Scholarly Outcomes

I presented a Digital Showcase based on this project at the 2016 Computers and Writing Conference in Rochester, New York. Attendees were invited to screen my instructional video and discuss the relationship of the Personal Video Essay to existing scholarly and popular genres. Additionally, Mary Ann Mengel and I are co-investigators on a project in progress titled “The Personal Video Essay and Multimodal Composition.” We obtained IRB approval to collect and study how students’ Personal Video Essays demonstrate their awareness of multimodal rhetoric, and 12 of 14 students provided informed consent. This project will begin in Summer 2016, with a goal of eventual presentation in Summer 2017.

Conclusion

In many respects, this TLI Grant reinforced my ongoing interest in producing videos and in teaching video production. The creation of an instructional video was fruitful not only in terms of the finished product, but also in its contributions to my understanding of the rewards and frustrations of shooting, editing, and shaping video. I came away from the project with a new appreciation for the inventive and technical aspects of that process, which I hopefully shared with my students. I look forward to future pedagogical and scholarly projects that build upon the TLI Grant’s creativity and collaboration.

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