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Using Video in the Writing Classroom: An Inclusive Pedagogical Approach to Making Good Arguments

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Using Video in the Writing Classroom: An Inclusive Pedagogical Approach to Making Good Arguments

Abstract

Following Dr. David Concepción's advice from the Mellon workshop in May, I decided to stop grading large-group discussion—and to not replace those points with other forms of oral performance like graded small-group discussion or speeches. I faced a problem, however, as my students' grades were now almost completely determined by their writing ability. And if it is true that American students of color (ASOC), first-generation college students, ESL students, and those from other disadvantaged backgrounds more often struggle with writing than do their privileged peers, then my class was *less* fair than before the change.

With (a lot of) help from Media Services, I decided to include a video essay production unit in my class. More specifically, students (in groups of three) had to create a video that tried to convince an undecided student to choose a common liberal arts major. The video needed to include a clear thesis, an engaging introduction, at least one interview, and effective secondary source material.

Ultimately, things went well. Many students genuinely seemed to enjoy learning to use the equipment and editing software. Most groups worked very well together to create interesting and engaging videos. Some of those students who struggled on more traditional essays thrived during this unit. Of course, there were also some challenges, but I am already looking forward to this unit next year.

Keywords

Video essay, media services, inclusivity

In response to the Mellon workshops in May, I decided to try something new in my FYS sections last fall. I dropped a unit in my course I called “Mythbusters,” in which students had to use scholarly sources to “bust” or “confirm” a popular belief (like whether or not taking Vitamin C shortens the duration of the common cold), and exchanged it with a video production unit, in which students in groups of three created a video “selling” a particular liberal arts major to an “undecided” student. The change was not simply to try something new. Instead, I wanted to find an assignment that required students to practice their argument skills without having to write another argument. Why was that my goal? Because I had found that, after making the changes suggested at the workshop, my students’ grades in my course were almost completely determined by their writing skills.

During the workshop, Dr. David Concepción strongly advised not to grade large-group discussions. His reasoning, which I have discussed with him via email, is twofold: 1) it unfairly advantages those students who find discussion easy, and 2) because of the difficulty of grading large-group discussions, our evaluation of it is particularly susceptible to bias. The source of this bias could be many things: a teacher might be tempted to grade more favorably those students whose views most closely match his/her own, the difficulty of using a rubric to grade discussion means there is more opportunity for non-relevant factors to influence the grade, or, related to my first point in the essay, grading large-group discussion unfairly favors those with certain personality traits.

In further conversations with David, he made clear that he is not against grading certain forms of oral performance. In his own classes, he uses group presentations, small-group discussions, conferences with students, and written reflections on the merits of what was said during large-group discussions. His main point, though, is that large-group discussions should not be graded—or that students should not get points simply for talking in a large group.

I took his advice and stopped grading group discussion. I also chose not to grade small-group discussions because, honestly, I do not know

how to grade fairly the performance of those groups I am not listening to. Also, adding the video unit meant that students would be completing two significant group projects in the first semester (the other is a formal debate), and I already get plenty of pushback from students who either run into less-than-stellar groupmates or who just prefer to work alone. I also did not feel comfortable increasing significantly the number of graded presentations in the class. First, I suspect the same problems that David mentioned regarding the grading of large-group discussion also might affect the grading of presentations or speeches. Like with group discussions, some students simply find it easier than others to get up in front of others. Given the difficulty of grading speeches (which I do not tape and therefore only hear/see once), I worry that bias comes into play here as well. Do the same biases that affect our evaluation of large-group discussion—and inform our decision to no longer grade it—disappear when we are evaluating speeches? I doubt it. Finally, and on a more practical level, my classes already spend a lot of time practicing public speaking in the second semester in preparation for their research paper presentations.

My decision to not grade discussion—and to not replace those missing points with other oral performance evaluation—created a problem. Initially, I had 1000 points total in my course, 20% of which were for large-group discussion. Now, without graded discussions, the new course only had 800 points. If the writing assignments in total made up 60% of my old course, they now made up 75% of my new course. Of course, I could add other assignments to get the total back up to 1000 points, but my options were primarily: 1) more writing assignments, 2) more graded presentations, or 3) exams.

So what is the problem? In attempting to make my course fairer by excluding graded discussions, I had made it less fair to those students who are weaker writers. All I had done is change which students were advantaged by the grading system and which ones were not. And if it is true that ASOC, first-generation college students, or other underprivileged populations are the ones we are targeting with increased inclusivity in our classrooms, then I

feared dropping the discussion portion of the grade was only going to hurt those students we are trying to help. In my own recent classes, dropping the graded large-group discussion would have hurt significantly the grades of the few ASOC students I have had, as their discussion skills surpassed their writing ones.

In an attempt to address these problems, I decided to try a video essay production unit after watching Ethan Wittrock and Adam Konczewski's presentation during the FYS workshops in May. The goal of this unit is to replace the missing discussion points in a way that does not require more writing—but still requires the students to practice the skills necessary to make good arguments. Here are the details. I chose six liberal arts majors—History, Environmental Studies, Mathematics, Economics, English, and Psychology—and students chose which major they wanted, though only three students were allowed per major. Each group created a short (3-5 minute) video essay arguing that students should choose their group's major. In order to make their arguments persuasive, students were required to use appropriate source material and to conduct at least one interview with a current student (junior or senior), a faculty member, or someone who graduated with that particular degree and was currently using it in the workplace. Adam and I decided to devote three weeks to the unit, with the first two classes used to introduce the equipment and video editing software, and the final two weeks to gather more footage, conduct interviews, find evidence, work with librarians, create and craft their arguments, confer with me and the Media Services folks, and finally present the video to the class.

The key word in this unit's title was "essay." I wanted to emphasize the continuity of the video unit with the other units during the semester. To do that, I used the same rubric for this unit that we did for all the other graded essays, making only minor changes to account for the different medium. More specifically, the students' grades were based on their ability to introduce the topic in an engaging way, create a clear thesis that formed the core of the video's message, consider their audience when making their appeals, organize their argument logically, and use appropriate evidence to

support their case. Only 10% of the grade was determined by “video specific” issues like aesthetics, sound quality, and editing.

Initially, I was concerned that only one or two students per section had any experience at all with the video editing software. Adam and Ethan assured me that this would not be a problem, and they were right, as the students took to it quickly without any significant issues going forward. The students also had few problems using any of the video equipment, though there was the random dead battery or accidentally deleted footage. Overall, the learning curve on the software and equipment was not a problem at all.

As with any group project, I also was concerned about individuals not doing their fair share. To combat this, I assigned two “progress reports” during the unit, in which each member of the group had to identify not only the specific tasks he/she had completed but also what the other members of the group had contributed as well. Finally, I did a peer evaluation after the project was over. I wish I could say all of the groups worked well together, but three of the twelve groups had individuals who clearly did not do their fair share, despite knowing very clearly that their grades would be hurt by their poor teamwork.

Along with the peer evaluations, I had other assignments built in to the unit in order to ensure groups were staying on track. After the first day of the unit, each group needed to check out a camera and gather some B-roll footage. This ensured that they knew how to check out equipment and work the cameras. Plus it gave us some footage with which to practice our editing skills during the next class. By the third class of the unit, they needed to pitch their plan for “selling” their major, including a brief explanation of their strategy and a short discussion of the research they had found thus far. By the end of the second week, they needed to have a complete rough draft. The final draft was due at the end of the third week. In addition to the final draft, they completed an assignment I called “Three Big Decisions.” Throughout the process, we expected the groups to make purposeful, conscious decisions about what footage to shoot, which editing decisions to make, what

information to emphasize, and which data to include. This assignment asked them to explain the reasoning behind what they considered the three most important decisions they had made while creating the video.

Things that worked:

1. When asked what one thing from our FYS course that students thought I should keep for next year, more than 50% of them said the video unit. While there were some groups with freeloader problems, the majority of groups were happy with the unit. I should say that this is not necessarily because this unit was any easier than the others. In fact, I would wager that students on average spent significantly more time working on this essay than they did their other (written) ones.
2. After their initial hesitation, this was an easy unit to “sell” to students. Correctly or not, many of them believe media skills are relevant for their future careers, so getting buy-in was not difficult, especially after they had 45 minutes to play around with the software and get any technological worries out of the way.
3. Those students who were weak writers did not struggle as much with this unit as they did in the other essay-based units. This point addresses one of my major goals regarding inclusivity in my classroom. Very often, students who struggle writing arguments are perfectly capable of arguing—including using evidence, evaluating source material, and anticipating opposing views. It’s my hope that this unit showed students that they have the intelligence to participate in it.
4. Some students found a genuine interest in something they had no idea existed only a few weeks prior. One group of students is now planning to work with Johnnie/Bennie Media to create a sports broadcast. Five or six students applied for an open position in Media Services for a student employee.

5. My lack of experience with either the equipment or the video editing software was not an issue. We had four Media Services personnel for each class session, so with only six groups, there was always help available, even outside of designated class hours.
6. While no students changed majors as a result of this project, three students were persuaded enough to add minors (one in History, one in Math, and one in English) in order to continue to develop the “soft skills” like writing and critical thinking that employers value. I also think many students developed a deeper understanding and respect for the various liberal arts majors and the philosophy behind this type of education.

Things I would change:

1. I would add another week to the unit. Most students needed to learn both the equipment and the editing software. They also had to complete research, conduct their interviews, organize their argument, and polish the final draft, all of which left them feeling very crunched for time. This meant they spent more time than I wanted worrying about the aesthetic and technical aspects of the videos—and not the argument, audience, and evidence. More specifically, I will add a full week before we begin working with the software and equipment. Also, I plan to require a very short, informal written assignment that includes some preliminary research, mainly to focus their attention on the argument itself.
2. The time crunch led to another issue: despite a rubric clearly stating that 90% of their grade would come from things other than the technical and aesthetic aspects of their videos, most groups spent too much time worrying about these “small things” and not worrying about the “big things” like clarity of argument and effective evidence. For example, one group spent many hours outside of class reshooting B-roll footage and editing their final draft, but they did not include any secondary source material in the finished product.

3. I will ask each student to account for the number of hours spent on the project instead of asking each to list what tasks he or she completed. I am considering asking each student to also guess how many hours each groupmate had spent on the project. I got the impression that some students who did not do their part thought that they did so. When talking with their groupmates, however, it was clear that those doing their share spent many more hours working on the project than did those who did not pull their weight. This made grading more difficult, as those students who felt they did their fair share (but did not) did lose points—and then were frustrated and upset at the lowered grades.
4. I am working on gaining more facility with the software and equipment. The Media Services folks were incredibly helpful, but I felt out of my league when faced with questions about adding sound, creating a voiceover, using the DSLR cameras, etc. While the students found my lack of competence somewhat amusing, it would be nice to not have to run to Ethan, Adam, Josh, or Bennet every time a student had a question.
5. Next time, we will spend more time practicing how to create effective visual aids and then figuring out how to present this information. It was very common for students to include a complicated graph or chart, but then not spend enough (or any) time explaining its meaning or relevance. This skill will also be helpful in the second semester when they need to give long presentations on their semester-long research projects.
6. Groups tended to rely much too heavily on the interview materials. Instead of using the interviews to support their own argument, multiple groups used the interview as the majority of the presentation itself. This is not unlike those students who rely too heavily on secondary source material in their other essays and research papers. Next year, I plan to use this unit as another opportunity to introduce the appropriate use of secondary source material.

Ultimately, it is my hope that adding a video production unit gives more students the chance to do well in my course. FYS is (in part) about writing, yes, but it is also about making good arguments, and writing a good argument is not the same as arguing well. Very few students knew anything about video editing before we stepped in the Media Lab. In that sense, at least, they were all more or less equal. And for those students whose backgrounds did not provide them with the skills necessary to thrive in the writing classroom, this unit provides an opportunity to be on more equal footing with their peers.

Note

I would like to thank all those who helped make this unit a success. In Media Services, Ethan Wittrock, Adam Konczewski, Joshua Akkermann and Bennett Frensko were incredibly helpful. A conversation with Madhu Mitra eased my worried mind regarding my lack of experience with video editing software. Last but not least, I would also like to thank Ann Sinko, Robert Campbell III, Brett Benesh, Mike Opitz, John Kendall, Greg Schroeder, Jonathan Nash, Derek Larson, Louis Johnston, Tom Kroll, and John Adix for their willingness to be interviewed by my students.