

Making Documentary Films: Beyond a Final Writing Class Project

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ABSTRACT

The integration of IT into education is making great impacts in today's teaching-learning process. It facilitates teachers in conducting their classes with ways traditional methods could not accomplish. As IT is increasingly accessible and user-friendly, it encourages a shift of teaching methods from the traditional (industrial) model to a more modern (inquiry) model. The shift entails a new orientation in classroom objectives, teaching-learning activities, and evaluation. As an example, a writing class may have an objective of improving the students' writing skills by conducting a short documentary filmmaking project as part of its evaluative method. In order for the project to succeed, certain support systems must be established and such establishment may prove cumbersome without the presence of IT. This research explores to what extent IT can assist a collaborative learning classroom achieve the objectives and innovate methods of learning that literally brings the real world into the classroom.

Keywords

Writing classes, final projects, filmmaking.

1. INTRODUCTION

As the revolution of Information Technology (IT) takes place, its impact has been felt in many aspects of the human lives. Education is no exception. Innovations in the teaching-learning process have been greatly assisted by what IT has been offering, and the trend continues to the point where the two fields are inseparable.

In its integration, IT has also supported, if not forced, a shift of gear in almost all facets of life. As it agrees with the demands of the world especially in the professional realm for faster and more comprehensive information, it gives academic institutions no other choice but to follow the rapid pace of change. The change includes the paradigms, objectives, and methods of studying. Otherwise, the institutions are potentially equipping their students with obsolete knowledge and skills which would prove non-beneficial for their pursuit for careers.

One of the common efforts of updating the teaching-learning process at present is the establishment of collaborative learning in the classrooms. This method explores the ways in which students are projected to become stakeholders of their own education: they share the responsibility of constructing their knowledge and enhancing their skills. That is, students work together in activities that demand less dominant role of the teacher and autonomously use other available resources to gather and transfer information into knowledge.

To date, IT is becoming one of the vital and reliable resources ready for use at the disposal of the learner and the teacher. The study of languages, for example, is now exploiting the capabilities

of multimedia-based software and computers to tackle difficult areas to teach. There are also studies regarding how IT and the incorporation of related device can enhance the impact of knowledge and skill in the student's way of thinking.

This study departs from a simple question of how writing classes can benefit from the presence of IT in terms of maintaining the spirit of collaborative learning and non-obsolete skill enhancement. Making a final project seems to be an ideal activity that stipulates innovative thinking while maintaining the purposes of formal education. Also, incorporating IT with the project is feasible due to its accessibility on the part of the participants.

Thus, this paper examines the role of final projects such as short documentary filmmaking in being an alternative learning activity in the teaching-learning process of the English language based on the inquiry model and Bloom's digital taxonomy to achieve the following objectives: (1) the improvements of the student's writing skills, especially for specific tasks and genre; (2) the reinforcement of skills in maintaining consistency in undertaking writing tasks; (3) the establishment of collaborative learning among the students, and (4) the implementation of other skills into student's English language skills in a constructivist ambience.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Leland and Krathwohl (2002)^[1] pointed out that there are two models of teaching and learning namely the industrial model and the inquiry model which describe the teaching-learning process through the characteristics of the participant's engagement. The industrial model suggests that students are expected to be submissive towards the teaching approaches, and the teacher holds a dominant role in determining the course of process. The inquiry model, however, reflects a more active role of the students in enriching their knowledge and experience. Another point to make about the model is how IT has an equally strategic position in the process.

With the revolution of technology and our increasing dependency in IT in almost all aspects of people's lives today, Leland and Krathwohl also emphasized the need to shift from the former to the latter model to synchronize the approach to education with the way we operate in the real world. The inquiry model has the objective of gearing the students to exploit technology in performing their duties at work. In their preparation, the learners and instructors are demanded to engage in social constructivist collaboration to construct their knowledge and skills and incorporate technology to make their tasks easier to perform. A curriculum of this method typically accentuates the integration method and the media relevant to the education and profession.

Table 1. The Characteristics of the Industrial and Inquiry Teaching-Learning Models

CHARACTERISTICS	INDUSTRIAL MODEL	INQUIRY MODEL
Purpose of education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conformity, obedience Prepare learner for factory job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Critical thinking, creativity Prepare learner for information /technology
Learning model	Behaviorism	Social constructivism
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classes graded by age Homogeneous groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiage classes Heterogeneous groups
Curriculum	3R's, narrow, fact-based	Multifaceted, problem solving
Instruction	Text-based, transmission	Multiple sources, transaction
Assessment	Uniform, standardized	Authentic, diverse
Role of learner	Passive, receive knowledge	Active, construct knowledge
Role of teacher	Foreman, clerk	Co-learner, facilitator
Role of parents	Follow dictates of school	Partner in decision-making
Role of administrator	Supervisor, manager	Instructional leader, co-leader
Type of literacy required	Decoding, defining, making	Translation, critical

Another theory of integrated learning comes from Anderson and Krathwohl's Blooms Digital Taxonomy (2001)^[2]. It expands Bloom's refined taxonomy by applying IT into the learning process. Picture 1 shows the stages of learning with *remembering* as the lowest level of thinking skill and *creating* as the highest level. The amalgamation of IT into the learning process aims at bringing the students to the highest level where they are autonomously capable of designing, constructing, planning, producing, inventing, devising, and or making something. A communication spectrum suggests how IT can also assist the participants to maintain communication during their process of production and or present the results during post-production. From the two theories mentioned above, it can be concluded that collaboration in knowledge construction and skill enrichment is a major factor to achieve the goals of education. The inquiry is duly noted for its emphasis on the contribution of the students in building up their knowledge. A particular item of the model worthy of note is that creativity is considered as a learning objective, and it complements critical thinking. In the support of the inquiry model, the digital taxonomy suggests that filmmaking

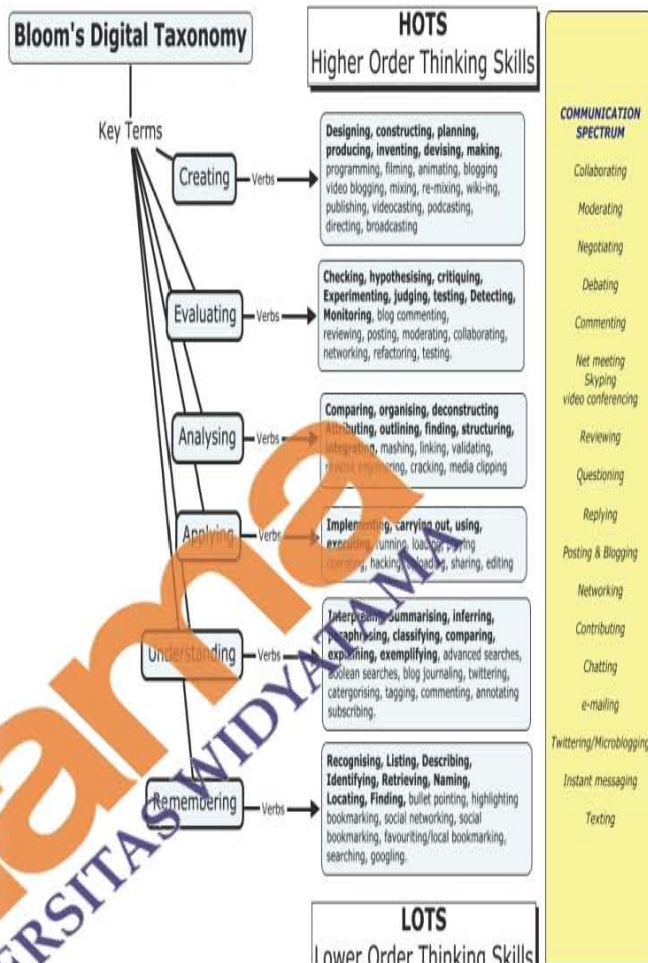


Figure 1. Bloom's Digital Taxonomy

is a high-end constructivist endeavor that reinforces creativity and critical thinking: it involves at least planning and producing knowledge as well as implementing skills in language and IT.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

In response to the two theories of collaborative learning aforementioned, it was decided that making a documentary film^{[3][4][5]} was a suitable activity for the final project for Essay Writing courses. The whole process took the whole academic year to complete and was carried out in three steps. The first semester and the first half of the second semester were dedicated to the writing skills reinforcement and the last part of the second semester was allocated for shooting, editing and presenting the films.

The first step was the evaluation of the student's level of argumentative writing skills. During the first semester, students were asked to describe a problem in Bandung of which they think was worthy of elaborating in a documentary film. During their research and discussion in the classroom, the lecturer encouraged them to focus on improving their diction and essay writing style which were then measured in the mid test. A comparison of their initial work and their work upon treatment served as individual's indication of progress which proved to be an effective to build their confidence in writing.

The second stage focused on persuasive writing and making documentary films. Students continued their writing on the same problem they were focusing in the previous semester. As an addition to the writing, the students focused on proposing feasible solutions to the problems. They were also required to convey their recommendations in a persuasive manner. Their best works were counted as their mid semester test.

The final stage comprised of transforming the students' best works into scripts for their documentary film. They were assigned to small groups that shared similar focal point or agreed to assimilate the problems into a single film. During class meetings, they discussed methods of the transformation and problems faced during the whole process. A blog was also made to hold off-class discussions among the students and monitor their progress. Before the second last meeting, the groups were expected to submit their work and prepare a short presentation. On the last meeting, the students along with invited guests viewed the films and gave comments on the films. Students were also asked to complete a Rikert-scale questionnaire regarding their impression on the activity, the final product and their progress and motivation.

4. DISCUSSION



Figure 2. A Scene from "Waste" (Tega Foodstall)

Most of the topics chosen relate to social and environmental issues observed in Bandung (Figure 2, 3 and 4). The questionnaire reflected that most of the students regard the issues to be prevalent, even though the initial agreement was to explore issues regarding college students to allow personal experiences assist their efforts in narrowing the observation to specific problems. The most common reason was that other topics needed extra time for research.

In the first semester, students were informed about the workload and information about the final project to show relevance between the topics to be discussed and the activities related to evaluation and the final project. At this stage, the students showed interest in organizing their writing using the argumentative format by responding to questions and tasks actively. They were able to develop their arguments on a focused standpoint as they scrutinize topics progressively changing from the easier to harder issues throughout the semester. The most challenging task was choosing the topic for the film: it was either due to lack of solid arguments

for good topics or vice versa. For the sake of evaluation, some students had to choose better arguments over better topics.

In the second stage, the students showed a lagging interest in continuing the program. It was due to the over-familiarity of the materials they repeatedly worked on as mentioned in the questionnaire. Being reminded that they are approaching the filmmaking stage, however, the students continued refining their works with more frequent peer discussions.

Before the making of the documentary film, the students were given examples from previous classes and major productions. The purpose was to observe the techniques used and decide which were feasible to use and or develop for their own films. Discussion and consultation on the methods include narration, audio-visual content, animated graphics and a progression of storyline. It was at this stage also that students were introduced to formats and required items of the film.

In regards to the technical details of the film, a few points were agreed upon:

1. The final product is presented in DVD quality.
2. The genre of the film is short documentary.
3. The duration of the film is between 10-15 minutes, including opening and closing credits.
4. The accepted filming equipment is either a video camera (disregarding its recording quality) or a hand phone camera.
5. Special effects and background sound are not mandatory.
6. Editing is done by the students by using at least basic programs like Windows® Film Maker.
7. Credits appear alphabetically.
8. The amount of money spent on the whole production should not exceed Rp.100.000.

The content was restricted to the following agreements:

1. The topic does not contain any derogatory issues.
2. The topic relates to social or environmental issues around the vicinity of the students (in Bandung).
3. The topics elaborated in the film derived from the essays chosen by the lecturer.
4. The spoken versus non-spoken ratio of the materials is 60:40, which entails 60 percent comprised of narration and interviews and 40 percent comprised of visual materials.

Other agreements were related to schedules (shooting and editing), deadline for submission and presentation. Also, students agreed to maintain communication regarding the materials and filmmaking process in English, both written and spoken.

Some of the main objectives in the documentary filmmaking were relatively easy to achieve:

1. There were indications that the student's writing skill improved in certain areas such as diction, organization and style. Persuasion was still an issue, since most of the students were mainly focused on the exposure and solutions to the problem.
2. Organization of ideas were consistent throughout the stages. Their outlines and drafts showed adherent tendencies to the flow of ideas. This was especially true for the documentary films; they were able to physically see the flow.

The series of activities also produced other achievements:

1. The collaboration established among the students included brainstorming, task distribution, and presentation. Discussions beyond the classes were also

common: students talked about how they could make improvements even although semester was already over.

2. The students kept active communication with the lecturer to consult about their essays and the filmmaking process. Thus, they were 'forced' to reinforce their other skills to achieve the main goal.
3. The quality of the films were adequate to be viewed by other than the students. Some were aired in local television programs, and others were adapted as materials for the Self-Access Center. The films were also suitable to be used as references for the next class.
4. The students appreciated the opportunity to conduct field research and present their findings in an entertaining way.
5. The films became part of the students' personal portfolio. Some students used them as examples of their work to apply for jobs.
6. Students were able to master (to a certain level) editing skills using various editing software. Some students have even established small editing business.

On the last meeting, the students filled out questionnaires regarding the project. Most of the students (72%) were happy with their work. The same can also be said about their overall views on film-making as an activity for their course and portfolio building: 78% of the students stated that they were highly motivated to complete the final project for the aforementioned purposes.

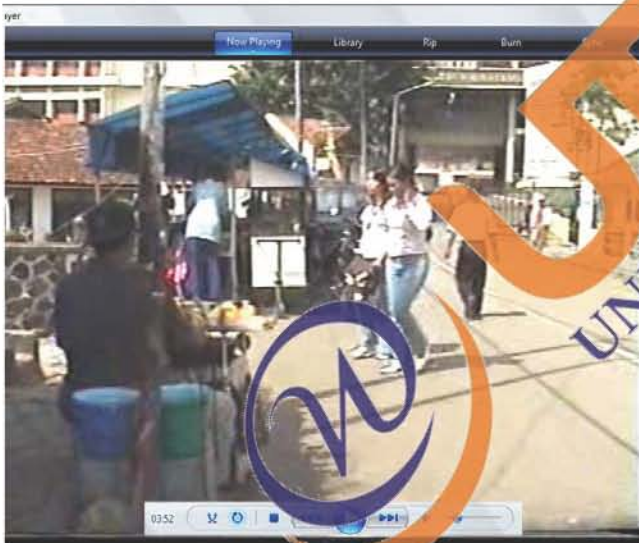


Figure 3. A Scene from "Street Side Foodstallers"

Some notes worth mentioning about the effectiveness and efficiency are as follows:

1. Some students complained about the lack of contribution from their team members in the production. This indicated a better monitoring system is in order.
2. The most common problem for the film making is the sound quality. Handheld video cameras provided sound recording capability that did not eliminate noises such wind, crowd and passing transport. An alternative to the problem is to dub the interviews or provide subtitles.



Figure 4. A Scene from "Bandung and FO"

5. CONCLUSION

The collaboration in the final project was not difficult to instigate due to the fact that user-friendly IT played an important role in facilitating the technical needs and the students can concentrate more on the content of the work. Some other constructivist activities are also feasible not only to monitor individual's writing skills progress but also the process of the documentary film making reflected in their blog entries. Other factors such as clear objectives and commitment of the parties involved tend to lessen the workload because each student comprehends their particularized role.

With the help of current technology, the final project proposed in this paper is also suitable for distance learning. A blog can serve as a mean of conducting on-line writing course, with main materials and students' assignments uploaded and accessible for either members of the course or the public. An electronic bulletin can function as a forum for discussions on progress, problems and solutions for the filmmaking part. Finally, streaming technology allows students to upload their films to commercial websites like Youtube for the purpose of sharing their works among their peers. The next step for the project is taking the collaborative writing experience to another level: a website dedicated to Essay Writing designed specifically to host writing activities and products is currently under construction to cater for the need to centralize the materials and assignments into one place. The site should have the capability of hosting multimedia materials in order for static (text, picture, diagrams) and dynamic (sound, moving picture, animation) entries be available for the participants.

Another point worth considering is giving further training on writing documentary film scripts. While the objective is not to produce scriptwriters per se, it should provide a perspective other than writing as pure rhetoric.

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