

Learning History with Mini-Camcorders

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Project Civiis is a curriculum project whose goal is the development of a middle-school U.S. history curriculum that engages students and is centered on inquiry, discussion, and deliberation.¹ It focuses on students in history classes in low-income or other schools labeled at-risk. In the project, we have attempted to use mini-camcorders in our efforts to create a curriculum that stimulates students who are often disengaged and underachieve in the social studies classroom. Mini-camcorders, such as the Flip from Cisco or similar models from Kodak and Sony, are relatively cheap (often under \$100), easy for students and teachers to use, versatile, and create high quality videos (see Table 1). These cameras can be plugged directly into almost any computer via a USB port to download the video, thus eliminating the need for tapes, disks, cables, or specialized software to capture or view the video. The video is exported in a common format (e.g., MP4, MOV) that can be edited in most video editing software (including software that comes with the camera) or shown directly using free software such as Quicktime or Windows Media.

In this article, we describe three specific activities in which we have integrated mini-camcorders in our units on the American Revolution, Civil War, and Post-Reconstruction and Progressive eras that we believe provide outlets for creative middle school students and engage students in authentic intellectual work.² These activities are structured so that students will have opportunities to reach challenging levels of content knowledge from the period through researching and constructing their own media. These activities provide a window to examine the social history of groups often not included in the curriculum (e.g., women and African Americans) and major figures who are often marginalized in the textbook.³ In addition to the three curricular examples using mini-camcorders presented below, we provide logistical and pedagogical tips for engaging stu-

dents in historical research and historical interpretation while putting together high quality videos (see Tables 2 and 3).

The three model activities, Battle News Broadcasts, Front Lines Scenarios, and Agents of Change Interviews, engage students in actively constructing knowledge, conducting historical inquiry and interpretation, and creating media to illustrate their new understandings and to help teach each other. Unlike the construction of desktop documentaries, which can be challenging logistically and technically for some teachers and students and may require a lot of time for students to have access to a computer individually, the mini-camcorders can be utilized for small groups and require very little actual time for filming.⁴ Instead, students in our activities engage in research, writing, and storyboarding using historical evidence (see Table 3). The technology



thus fades to the background as a medium of communication rather than serving as a centerpiece of the actual activity.

Battle News Broadcasts

This activity is integrated into units on the American Revolution and Civil War. In this activity, students, in pairs or small groups, research individual battles in order to produce short news broadcasts (less than five minutes when finished). In each broadcast, students must convey the most important information about the battle and show its location on a map. Students are encouraged to view clips of real front-line news broadcasts for ideas about what kinds of other information they might include and what the tone of their own broadcast should be. Student groups then research their battles and distill geographic, tactical, logistical, and other key information into their news



broadcasts using journalistic methods such as visual aids and interviews to share the story of a battle with their classmates in a compelling way. In any video project, student groups should not begin filming until they have presented a satisfactory script and have created their visual aids. This assures that the time students spend with the camcorder will be productive and focused. The finished videos, rather than being shown back to back in a single class period on the day the project is due, are shown to the class throughout their study of the Revolutionary War and Civil War to enhance student learning about these events. For example, when students are about to study the Battle of Saratoga, the student-created news clip serves as an introduction to the topic.

Keys for this activity include:

1. Student groups need to engage in a structured analysis of the battle, the major commanders and units, the strategies and major events for each side, and implications of the event.
2. Students construct a storyboard and script for their newscast, including in-the-field reporters and/or reporters at a news desk.
3. Students are encouraged to

construct visual aids to use in their video (e.g., maps or photographs).

4. When students view the different broadcasts, they engage in collecting information needed later for the test, and also explicitly debrief on the quality of the video and any questions raised.

Front Lines Scenarios

This activity is part of our American Revolution Unit in a lesson examining what life was like for ordinary people during the war, but could be replicated for any kind of conflict or period setting. Students are divided into groups to examine a collection of primary and secondary source documents related to daily life in the Continental army, the British army, and the “homefront.” After examining their assigned document set as a group, they agree on roles to play (e.g., a Hessian soldier, a camp follower, or a former slave serving in the British Army) and work independently to create historical characters by using the document set to answer a series of guiding questions. The group then comes back together to create a realistic scenario in which these historical characters interact. For example, a group of soldiers may be discussing their hardships around a campfire or recalling the war, years later.

Once an outline script is drafted and rehearsed, the students record their scene. The scenes can be shared with classmates and, if feasible, posted on a secure class website. This activity was influenced by our work with one of our partners on the project, Colonial Williamsburg, and their work using historical interpretation.⁵

Keys for this activity include:

1. Students should be engaged in recognizing the perspectives of those in the past within the context of the time through their research and inquiry into the historical figures they are interpreting. Teachers need to remind students that they will never truly be able to understand experiences of those in the past but aim to capture a snapshot of their experiences as uncovered in historical evidence.
2. Students focus on identifying aspects of life or experiences that illustrate differences and similarities with experiences in the present, and highlight key things that their classmates may not know about life during that period.
3. Students should highlight the social history of figures involved in key events in their films so that the class can place these figures in context as part of other lessons in the unit.
4. Students chart out the different perspectives when viewing the final videos in order to help them answer the larger central questions posed, such as “How did different groups experience the war?” or “Why did groups decide to remain loyal to the British?”

Agents of Change Interviews

In this Post-Reconstruction and Progressive Era lesson, student groups

Table 1. Mini-Camcorders Comparisons

Camera Name	Features	Editing software included with camera?	Video File Format	Recording Capabilities and Storage
Cisco Flip Ultra (2nd generation)	Digital zoom	yes	MP4 files	2 hours VGA quality film (newer, more expensive models record in HD)
Kodak Zi8	Digital zoom and image stabilization	yes	H.264 (MOV), AAC LC	HD only; must purchase SD cards to store more than 2-3 minutes of video in the camera
Sony Bloggie	Digital zoom, image stabilization, face recognition, swiveling lens	yes	HD MP4	HD only; must purchase SD cards to store video on camera
Creative Labs Vado	Digital zoom	yes	H.264 AVI	Stores 8 hours in VGA, 4 in HD, and 2 in HD+

study a particular “agent of change” from the time period (e.g., Mother Jones, Thomas Edison, or Jane Addams). Each group is responsible for creating a video of a talk-show style interview with this agent of change. Each member of the group has a distinct responsibility. The student interviewers use guidelines from broadcast journalism or conducting oral histories to create interview questions that will help the famous historical figures to convey important facts as well as key information about their causes, difficulties, and accomplishments. The agent of change reads a synopsis of the historical character’s life and accomplishments and develops plausible answers to the interviewer’s questions, conducting additional research as needed. Additional group members work with the interviewer and agent of change actor to complete their tasks and take care of staging and recording the interview. Completed interview videos are then used as a starting point for discussing the various meanings of progress and the impact of individuals and groups in making change happen.

Keys for this activity include:

1. Students should focus on researching the historical agent’s life and experiences in order to induce and construct thoughtful and important questions. Teachers may need to explicitly work with students to hone skills in questioning.

Table 2. Additional Pedagogical Uses for Mini-Camcorders

- Record class discussions and play back for student analysis and debriefing.
- Capture footage of special guest speakers or student presentations.
- Create video clips of student role plays and dramatizations.
- Conduct oral histories with family or community members.
- Share class review sessions and allow students to access from home as a study aid.
- Record important class sessions for absent students.
- Create video supports to help students analyze wordy or complicated primary sources.
- Create “think out loud” videos of students analyzing historical evidence or working through a complicated problem as an assessment preparation support.
- Create video explanations, reminders, or mnemonics for commonly confused information to assist ELL and below grade level readers.

Table 3. Steps for Successful Video Production

1. Teach students basic skills in using the camera, framing shots using the rule of thirds, and basic lighting and sound tips (e.g., to avoid bright light or noisy areas).
2. Watch sample videos as models (e.g., TV news, interviews).
3. Create a plan for the problem, content, or question that will be addressed with the film.
4. Research the topic and analyze a variety of sources for corroborating evidence and rich narratives and perspectives.
5. Construct an outline or storyboard for the video, which includes sketching out the “scenes” for the film, who will appear in each cut, how it should be filmed, and other visual or audio effects that will be needed for each scene (see www.ddguild.org/resources.html for an example storyboard).
6. Create a script of what students will say and do in the film with explicit instructions for the camera person, the students appearing in each scene, and any audio or visuals that are needed.
7. Film the scenes, export the video from the camera, and do post-production to add titles and effects or trim unnecessary footage or unwanted takes if necessary.⁶
8. The Urban School of San Francisco’s site is a great resource for more information on interviews and video production: www.tellingstories.org/about/index.html

- Teachers should emphasize that although the students will never fully be able to understand what these historical agents experienced, the goal is to form an understanding of his or her accomplishments and motivations, as well as challenges the agent faced, and what experiences or characteristics helped him or her succeed.
- Teachers may want students to place the historical agents into context and look at the major social and political movements during the period in which the individuals were involved. This emphasizes the context of the period and the fact that these agents did not work alone but were part of larger movements, many of which may continue in some form today.

Conclusion

These models of history instruction using mini-camcorders are designed to engage students in authentic and powerful learning and develop media production skills. Students will be engaged in developing aspects of historical empathy, such as perspective recognition, historical inquiry and interpretation, and improving their writing and communication skills (e.g., through scripts, interview questions, and interviewing). These model activities using mini-camcorders work toward state and national standards in both learning content as well as developing skills, and also foster the goals for 21st century citizenship through learning valuable skills in the production of media 📹

Notes

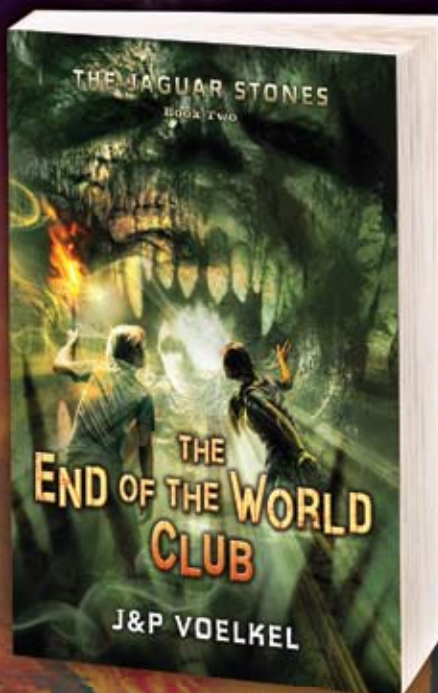
- Project Civis is a curriculum development and research project funded under the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act, Institute of Education Sciences, United States Department of Education. The curriculum and materials developed will be available starting in the summer of 2012, <http://education.wm.edu/centers/civis/>.
- For more on Authentic Intellectual Work, see Geoff

Scheurman and Fred Newmann, "Authentic Intellectual Work in Social Studies: Putting Performance Before Pedagogy," *Social Education* 62 (1998): 23-25; and Fred Newmann, Bruce King, and Dana Carmichael, *Authentic Instruction and Assessment: Common Standards for Rigor and Relevance in Teaching Academic Subjects* (Des Moines, Iowa: Iowa Department of Education), <http://centerforaiw.com/resources/center-aiw-materials>.

- James Loewen. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1995).
- Mark Hofer and Kathleen Owings Swan, "Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge in Action: A Case Study of a Middle School Digital Documentary Project," *Journal of Research on Technology in Education* 41 (2006): 179-200.
- Greg Timmons, "Historical Character Interpretation," Colonial Williamsburg Teacher Resources, www.history.org/history/teaching/eneletter/volume7/dec08/teachstrategy.cfm.
- For another model of the production process, see Kathleen Owings Swan, Mark Hofer, and Linda Levstik, "Camera! Action! Collaborate with Digital Moviemaking," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 19 (2007): 172

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