

DIGITAL VIDEO AND WRITING WITH PRIORITY LEARNERS

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Abstract

Digital technology has become more ubiquitous in classrooms across the western world. Literacy learning is topical in New Zealand education under the umbrella of the current National Standards policy, a policy introduced on the basis of rhetoric around improving achievement for priority learners. The study presented in this paper would then appear to be timely in a number of ways. The paper outlines the historical context and relevancy of the study. The paper discusses the teaching and learning environment in which the research was conducted. Data were gathered through the medium of semi-structured interview and was analysed and a number of themes emerged. Findings indicate that working with digital video as a learning medium can have positive effects on children's writing. These effects related to increased levels of motivation and confidence. Participants were able to focus on literacy tasks for prolonged periods and that working with digital video in this way had positive effects on the participants' vocabulary. Confidence was exhibited through feelings of pride and a strengthened personal and cultural voice.

Keywords

Digital video, literacy skills, writer identity, student voice, priority learners

Introduction

The Year 7 and 8 group of Pasifika and ESOL students had been identified as 'priority learners' (ERO, 2012) by the school's literacy leaders. The students had been assessed as achieving at *well below* the National Standard by their classroom teachers. The students interviewed for this study all took part in a teaching and learning programme. The 10-week programme involved students in developing a written text and transforming their texts into short digital films. After completing this programme the participants attended a *movie evening* at which their films were shared with an invited audience.

In my role as teacher in the project, I guided and facilitated the learning programme in which the students created their writing and movies. As the researcher, I interviewed the research participants and *qualitative* data was obtained from participants through semi-structured interviews. The research questions focused on student experiences, feelings and beliefs not on the evaluation of the programme directly. I wanted to explore ways in which the teaching and learning programme may have affected these students' opinions of themselves as literacy learners. The themes discussed in the study relate to working with digital technology, using specific learning models and the ways that the students' experience affected their perceptions of themselves as literacy learners.

Context in time and place

In New Zealand, teachers have historically seen the value of advancements in audio and visual technology in the classroom. In the early part of the 20th Century, teachers made use of developing mediums such as filmstrip projectors and by the late 1920s radio broadcasts were being used as classroom resources. In the 1940s, the government of the day had seen the value of film in education and had developed a National Film Library (Earl & Forbes, 2012). In the 1960s, as television became established, the benefits of educational qualities were recognised by educators. Although film, radio and television were able to expose students to influences outside of their own community or even

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nation, these were essentially non-interactive mediums. This is in contrast to today's digital advancements that enable teachers and students to produce and edit video that can potentially be shared around the globe. High definition digital video and mp3 audio advancements have made filmmaking significantly more accessible to teachers and students.

The teaching and learning programme

There was a range of language and literacy abilities within the group of 10 students. From the group eight were selected to be research participants. There were 10 one-hour sessions, although some students were not able to attend every session. In contrast, two of the students worked on their projects outside of the scheduled sessions. The learners were informed of the programme's aims: 1) to create a movie from their writing; and, 2) to present that movie to an audience. Students were encouraged to work collaboratively or be as independent as they felt they needed to be. They were shown two examples of movies from a previous project and asked to choose a subject to write about that interested them. They were also reminded that they had to be able to imagine the text being made into a movie. The students came up with several ideas each and settled on a preferred option after group/peer/teacher consultation. The approximate number of words in the resulting texts was between 300–500.

Once the writing was complete, the students practised reading their texts. Students then read their text aloud into a microphone. Their instructions were to break the writing into manageable sections for audio recording. The sections were of a size that the student could read with an acceptable level of fluency. GarageBand software was used for capturing the audio. The students soon became proficient with the recording process and were able to record each other's texts independently of the teacher. After each numbered section of text had been recorded, the students were able to review and either discard, redo or keep the recorded text. The recordings were shared as iTunes, numbered and stored in labelled folders.

During the filming phase, students made segments of film that illustrated the chunks of text that they had written and recorded. Students referred to the written version of their texts and ticked each one off as it had been accurately portrayed on digital video.

A range of equipment was provided for these students to use:

- digital cameras;
- tripod;
- submersible cameras;
- GoPro camera with accessories such as extendable monopod (selfie stick) and a range of mounts including a head mount;
- iPad and iPad GoPro app for camera operation via Bluetooth; and
- MacBook pro laptops.

As with the written and audio texts, students reviewed each video segment for compatibility with the segments of text. They also reviewed the segments from a technical perspective, taking into account adequate lighting, clear focus, steady camera action and appropriately framed shot. The video footage was uploaded to the computers by inserting the camera's SD or micro SD card into the laptop card reader, connecting the camera and laptop together by means of a cable or by viewing the video on the iPad/iPhone Bluetooth app. The finished video segments were numbered and stored in folders alongside the matching written and audio texts.

At the beginning of the editing and production phase the students had

- a written text (in numbered sections)
- a set of numerically sequenced mp3 audio recordings (an audio version of the written text); and
- a set of video segments that directly related to the texts.

Students then used iMovie software to assemble their films.

The finished movies were linked together so that there was approximately 50 minutes of film. This was then divided into two halves.

Over two sessions the group viewed the movies as a class and we called this our “private viewing”. It was interesting to observe that although a number of the students were painfully shy, there was a heightened positive dynamic in the room during this viewing. I observed a wide range of body language that indicated to me both acute embarrassment and glowing pride. Some students covered their faces momentarily, blushed and appeared extremely self-conscious when their videos were screened. At the same time, despite the conflicting pubescent rushes of emotion I sensed an overwhelming feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment in the room. The students were supportive of each other and were a consistently positive audience.

The students had been made aware from the outset, that there would be an audience for their work at a presentation evening at the end of the project to celebrate their achievements. The group discussed who that audience might be and jointly decided that they would invite their parents and siblings plus a select number of personal friends.

During the final learning sessions, the students either put the finishing touches to their movies or prepared for the movie night by making posters, invitations and entry tickets. A cinema style popcorn machine was hired for the evening. The students assumed roles as cinema ushers/usherettes, projectionists or worked in the refreshment kiosk.

The school hall was used as a cinema. It was fit for the purpose as it could be blacked out easily, had a large projection screen and high quality sound system. A commercial style popcorn maker was hired and the student participants designed movie tickets and created a cinema like environment complete with torch bearing ushers. The movie was presented to an audience of approximately 50 people (10 adults and 40 children). There was a public acknowledgement of the writers’ achievement before the first half was shown, a 25-minute first half, a 10-minute interval with refreshments and drinks, a second half and finally, further public acknowledgements of the writers’ accomplishments.

Methodology

For this particular small-scale study it was decided that interviews would be most appropriate for the task of data collection. Each of the participants in the project would have had their own unique life experiences and would have interpreted them differently. Each person’s reality would be unique (Krauss, 2005). Although an aspect of programme evaluation naturally was included, this study aimed to collect the participants’ experiences, perspectives and perceptions. Semi structured interviewing can be particularly effective in gathering information related to the participants’ wider understanding of an issue (Mentor, 2011). Interview questions were designed to obtain specific information. It was deemed appropriate to use semi-structured interview for this interpretive study.

Some of the participants, who were all supplied with a copy of the questions, had recently arrived in New Zealand. They had limited knowledge of the English language and their literacy skills were at an early stage of development. Interviews were conducted in English so it was necessary to explain and read the questions to these participants. The conversational nature of semi structured interviewing made it useful for engaging and supporting the participants in discussion and stimulating dialogue to elicit further information.

Interview findings

A number of themes emerged during the interviews and subsequent data analysis that related to how the participants felt about themselves as literacy learners in an overall sense and, their perceptions in response to their specific experiences during the digital video learning programme.

Themes emerged that related to writer self-expression, sense of self and the enhanced projection of student voice. The experience of being interviewed was new for these children. All of the participants were able to articulate that they had had a positive experience during the teaching and learning programme although they typically answered in abbreviated or short sentences. Participant C remarked that she believed that using video had helped her writing. When asked what she thought the audience had felt about her movie she stated that she believed they would have thought it is was

“creative”. Her classroom teacher had complimented her on her use of different shots. A number of participants suggested that the teaching and learning programme had provided enhanced opportunities to be able to express their creativity and to communicate with the audience on a more personal level. Participant A had felt that she often found it difficult to be listened to during classroom time and that others dominated. In the digital video learning sessions, she felt like she could proudly share her culture and her personality. At the same time, she could share her literacy skills. When asked what showing her movie to an audience meant to her she stated “A great expression of how proud you can be of yourself from two ways”. Participant A was referring to being able to share both her writing skills and something of her cultural identity through speaking her first language in the film.

Sense of progress and belief in future progress

At the time of the interviews, all of the participants appeared to have positive attitudes about themselves as literacy learners. Overall, the participants appeared to hold realistic opinions related to their current levels of literacy and language development. While three participants recognised that they were at an early stage of development related to English being an additional language. Others appeared to have a strong sense of belief in their own potential as developing literacy learners. For example, Participant C stated “Last year I sometimes got stuck on things and this year I have learnt more things that would help me”. When asked what she thought her family would think of her writing she stated, “I reckon they’d think I improved a lot more better than last year.” When participant E was asked to describe herself as a literacy learner in a few words she stated “good, bad, low stage and great”. After further discussion, she was able to clarify that she felt that she was a good reader who was at an early stage but was getting better. None of the participants held pessimistic views of themselves as writers and all believed that they were continuing to develop.

Participant responses to audience

All of the participants without hesitation described feelings of “embarrassment” related to an audience viewing their movie. This was in response to the interview question that asked “How did you feel when you saw your writing/movie on the big screen?” Participant A and Participant E stated that they were ‘embarrassed’ and ‘scared’. Despite saying this, their body language during the interview did not indicate that they were feeling negative about the experience. My intuitive feeling was that they were trying to describe feelings of nervous anticipation using their developing vocabulary.

In addition to using the words embarrassment and scared, participants also used words like shy and shame. However, as Participant M stated in the interview that she experienced strong feelings of shyness during the screening but in discussion revealed that the feelings were actually positive in nature. The participants described some of the physical symptoms they had experienced. These related to blushing, wanting to bury their heads and having a rapid heartbeat. It was evident that seeing their images on the screen and more specifically hearing their voices was a decidedly more intense experience than sharing a piece of written text. On further questioning, participants described anxieties and worries related to their perceptions of how they thought the audience may react to, or be affected by their movie. It appeared that they feared that the audience might become bored, disinterested or critical of their work. Participant C stated, “I was afraid that people might thought it was boring”. Participant F also stated that she was worried that the audience may not like her movie.

This was not true of all the participants. For example, in response to the interview question “What do you think the audience thought about your writing/movie?” Participant A said “I wasn’t actually really worried cos people have different views and my view is that I actually liked it. If they liked it they liked it, if they didn’t they didn’t.”

While the participants did communicate some degree of emotional insecurity in terms of how they predicted potential audience reaction, there was an underlying feeling of self-consciousness and satisfaction in the quality of their finished movie products.

Seeing benefit for the audience as well as themselves

The participants were overwhelmingly confident that their movies were a product that would benefit the audience. They firmly believed that their work was both worthy of audience engagement and a

valid creation. In interview, during prompts designed to discover participants' beliefs about audience perception, the following quotes were taken from the transcripts:

Participant A stated: "It was good and exciting cos they're listening in a different language."

Participant M believed that the audience would be impressed by her developing English language skills and stated: "They thought that I was speaking much better English." An acknowledgment of the impact on spoken as well as written English literacy skills of this programme.

Participant S was able to articulate his belief that the audience would not have seen writing presented in this way before and that they would have enjoyed it.

Participant F suggested that her movie contained a variety of interesting elements and stated: "I think they enjoyed my movie."

Participant C felt a sense of fulfilment because she had enabled her classroom teacher and a group of her friends to have a positive experience by viewing her movie. When asked what her teacher said about the movie she stated: "He said it was fantastic and how great the shots were." In the interview this clearly positively stimulated her.

Participant E was convinced that her instructional movie on milk shake making would have engaged the audience because they would have wanted to do what she was doing. She added "Cos they might want to do it, they might want to do the milkshake".

Feedback from others, that these participants received and shared in the course of the interviews, covered aspects of digital literacy and English speaking skills. Conversations about skills in written English demonstrated in the written script behind the movie were not so obvious.

Looking back with pride

The participants all used the word 'proud' in describing how they felt after their movie had been presented to an audience. Participant F stated "I felt great and proud of myself because I made my own movie." None of the participants described any negative feelings or emotions at all in relation to the post-presentation stages. It was evident that, despite the initial feelings of shyness, receiving attention from a large audience positively stimulated the participants' self-confidence.

Peers, families and teachers of these students also reinforced the positive climate by applauding, making affirming comments and by posting the participant's' movies on their personal social media pages. As a teacher, I sensed feelings of positive engagement from the students. This was particularly evident after screenings of the films. I believed that the programme had been successful because the students had participated in literacy learning experiences resulting in these feelings of accomplishment which could influence their opinions of themselves as literacy learners in the future.

Promoting student voice

Aside from the research seeking these students' views, the study highlights two elements that influenced the levels of student voice through the opportunities provided by the teaching and learning programme these students completed. These were the teaching model and the medium of digital technology.

The teaching model, inspired by the ideas of Graves (1995) encouraged the participants to create text that was based around their own experience and to have topics that the participants had personally chosen. The teaching model used, allowed the participants to choose the subject they wrote about and although they were embarking on a writing project, the most valued components were their ideas. During the interviews, the participants commented positively on the fact that they were able to share something very personal. Participant A was able to share her first language with an audience and communicate a side of her that was previously unknown to the audience. She stated "It was good and exciting cos they're listening in a different language". In addition to sharing their topic ideas, participants were able to share something of their social and cultural identities.

In order to create their films, the participants were exposed to reading and writing in authentic contexts. So much so that I believe they were processing challenging text without consciously realising that they were embarking on literacy learning. This was especially evident during the audio

recording stage. To gain a level of fluency the participants were happy to read and re-read challenging texts which contained new and unfamiliar vocabulary. As their purpose was to make an acceptable audio recording they focused their efforts on the speaking task. Researcher observation suggests the participants in the study took part in an affirming activity that was a product of their own writing and ideas.

Digital technology provided both a platform and a scaffold for the learners in this study, it enabled participants to access information and generate knowledge. It was the vehicle by which students were able to conceptualise, produce, store and present their ideas. The participants acquired skills in using the digital tools and became familiar with a variety of technological practices while creating their texts. This incidental learning allowed students to gain transferable skills in digital literacy. This experience built knowledge and facility that is transferable to many settings that the learner is likely to experience. The Apple applications used in the programme such as GarageBand, iMovie, iPhoto and iTunes proved to be a logical, straightforward and user friendly way of building the students' creations. During the interviews Participant C was asked about her experience of working with iMovie and commented, "I like how I had all the information and tools to create my writing into a short film".

Evidence gathered in this study suggests that working with digital video is a positive experience for learners; it has promoted critical self-reflection on their writing of the script and review of their movie and has contributed to raised levels of participant self-efficacy. As the programme teacher, I experienced frustrations with the technology. These related to limited resources in numbers of suitable computers and camera equipment.

Research challenges

As a researcher, a major challenge was student absenteeism or unavailability during the interview stage. This also affected the teaching and learning phase of the project. If sufficient time and resources were allocated to any future project, I would suggest that larger numbers of students participate and that significantly more time be scheduled for the production stage of the video making process. In advocating the benefits of such programmes I acknowledge the commitment needed by school leaders and community to support such programmes with staffing, resources, space and equipment.

While no evidence has been gathered in this study pertaining to formal academic levels of the participants, student responses and teacher observations confirm the theories relating to motivation, enjoyment and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993; Puca & Schmalt, 1999; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007) and suggest that working with engaging activities, such as digital video production, could potentially affect achievement in literacy. When Participant C was asked if she had always enjoyed writing she stated, "yes, but before I used to think like, it's hard and that, but I've got more interested."

This research developed from a school implementing a digital video programme in literacy for a group of struggling learners. The outcomes of this programme demonstrate benefits for these students included development in their identity as a writer and having an authentic opportunity to have a voice—personal, social and cultural—in the learning setting, and through their video. From my perspective as teacher/researcher I observed these tentative writers create movies that they were very proud of. These movies were of significance to the writers and were set in contexts that they could personally identify with. Both the process and end products provided the students with affirming and positive experiences. Students who had not felt particularly successful as writers in the past enjoyed accolades, applause and positive attention. This attention came from their peers, families and teachers.

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