CAMERA ROLLING AND ACTION!

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Studying film in Years 7-10 has the potential to be one of the most exciting units for students. How often, though, have you heard ‘Oh no not more of that camera angle stuff, that’s boring’? It does not have to be boring and getting students to create their own films is an exciting way to develop deep knowledge about the mechanics of film.

I learn best through doing. If I learn best through doing then I should endeavour to provide my students with practical learning opportunities. This approach, particularly to film making, has provided students with authentic learning opportunities and excellent media exposure for Kingswood in 2013 with a front page story in the SMH during May.

For the last five years I have trialled various methods of getting students to create film: stop motion, standard motion, made in-class or as a class assignment. One of the most frustrating experiences in teaching film, student frustration at story boarding and lack of different camera angles in student films, can be easily avoided. As teachers we often want students to use different angles in their films; we talk about it with them and then expect that they can go out and do it. I do the following to overcome this problem.

Mini Project Steps

Set students a mini project to create a single scene of 20 seconds that uses multiple angles to create a more visually appealing scene. Talk about how interesting a scene of a classroom would be if the camera stayed in the same place for the entire scene – illustrate that camera angles and techniques are like words in a story – they are the mechanics to create a visually descriptive scene.

1. Demonstrate the recording of a short scene and the different takes, angles and camera movement to make up the one scene. The following is an example of a sequence of shots that I have recorded as a demonstration for students:
   - full shot of the door opening and student coming in
   - close up of the door handle moving and the door opening
   - full side shot of the student walking in
   - medium front shot tracking the student walking
   - high angle of student sitting in their seat and drawing
   - point of view of the student sitting in their seat and drawing

   What is important here is that students witness that a single scene with multiple shots has several independent recordings. No script or talking is necessary for this short sample scene.

2. Distribute these shots in the next period to individual students. The students will now engage in learning a few skills with regard to editing in your chosen software. I use Adobe Premiere Pro, but Premiere Elements is also excellent. Step students through importing clips and setting in and out-points for each section that you require. Put the clips into a sequence that works best and finish it by inserting a title at the front of the scene. This gives students the skills in the software but also demonstrates the necessity of the different shots taken in the previous lesson.
3. Now you can have some fun and teach students about how lighting, sound effects, speed of clips and music can affect the meaning in a scene. I like to provide some sad emotional music, dramatic music and some party music and I get students to create three different versions of their scenes using different music and lighting and speed changes. Once this process has been finished, it is great to show the four different versions and discuss how the tone and meaning is affected by these changes.

4. Get students to create their own 20–30 second scene that uses five camera angles. Import and edit.

5. After this process of learning to include different angles and basic editing skills is complete get students to brainstorm their three-minute film. I have found that there is a lot more success with story boarding at this stage as they have experienced the creative process of taking multiple shots from different angles to create their scenes.

You might like to set a longer time for a film for your class, however, around 3-4 minutes is what I have found works best for me. Of course, if you are doing stop motion I would suggest only aim for 90–120 seconds.

I have found that as a class exercise I have had the most success when films do not contain dialogue. It means that we don’t have to worry about not having fancy equipment to pick up sound and there is less time pressure in terms of scripting and acting.

Summary of steps:
1. Record a short 20 second scene using multiple camera angles with the class
2. Distribute the footage to all students
3. Learn the editing software through editing the scene together
4. Experiment with lighting, sound and speed to see changes in meaning
5. Students shoot their own 20–30 second scene using different angles and edit to consolidate software skills

Equipment:
Until this year students in my classes had been using compact cameras that I had purchased from Ebay for between $20 and $50. These cameras are adequate for stop motion and standard motion films. They work best in films where there is no dialogue required – such as a music video clip.

If you really want students to be able to create films with dialogue you really need an external microphone. There are some affordable microphones from Rode Microphones that attach to a Video Camera or DSLR via 3.5mm jacks.

If your school can afford to purchase some equipment look at getting a couple of DSLR cameras and microphones, a couple of tripods and slider, a cheap green screen and lights.

If you are able to purchase computers for editing the Advanced Model Lenovo for NSW DEC is best value machine. You can contact me at timothy.creighton1@det.nsw.edu.au for further assistance if needed.

What classes and units could I do this with?
The curriculum has plenty of flexibility for teachers to get students to engage in this practical learning method. The following outcomes are addressed in getting students to compose digital texts.
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EN4-1A, EN4-2A, EN4-3B, EN5-1A, EN5-2A, EN5-3B, EN5-5C

For low ability classes I have made them do a stop motion film. This ensures that they think carefully about the angles and the pace of creating the film forces them to work more carefully. Be armed with a few ideas for them to be able to put into action. You might want to provide them with the basic outline of a film and get them to plan the shots. More able classes can cope with greater freedom, however, it may be a good idea to provide them with some possible plot suggestions too. Like short stories it is important for students to focus on a moment in time and not have a plot as big as Ben Hur.

Almost any unit of work can have a film aspect to it. Here are some ideas:

- Create/change a scene from a novel
- adapt a poem studied in class into film
- a video biography
- a favourite-poem-project video (my favourite is the Gwendolyn Brooks poem – We real cool. Excellent video too)
- 60 second Shakespeare
- Persuasion and advertising – create your own commercial
- 5 minute documentary on an issue
- Genre: create a two minute action/thriller/anti-bullying film
- Make a music video

When to run this during the year?

This can be an excellent task to run during Term 4 to engage students who believe that the year is over. Last year I ran a stop-motion unit with a low-ability Year 8 class and it was the highlight of my teaching year. The unit bridged the end of Term 1 2013 and second term 2013.

Two weeks should be sufficient time to teach these skills from the beginning. It is important to be flexible with what you believe should occur in the planning stages of a film. Most students will story board something and end up with something different as they discover problems along the way. If your classes were already skilled in using editing software and competent in building scenes then I would still allow at least one week.

Presentation and reflection

This type of activity really lends itself to PBL. A good way to showcase their learning is for students to present to their peers and/or to another year group where a speech accompanies their film. The speech can reflect upon what they learned about planning and editing a film. Additionally you might like to invite parents to a showcase of their films.

Analysis

I have found that students are much better prepared to discuss and analyse film technique after they have thought deeply about it through their own productions. Short films, such as Tropfest films, are a great resource to use for students to analyse as they are, by description, short. Some basic activities that you could do include:

- Watch a scene, or a short film, and tally each time there is a camera change. Discuss why
- Some shots are more important than others – what do you think are the key shots in this film? Justify your opinion.
- Analyse the role of diegetic and non-diegetic sound in the scene/film
- Compose an extended response on how meaning is shaped through film technique

Student samples

You can find a range of student created films using the method outlined above on the Kingswood High English Youtube page here: http://goo.gl/JCoR69

Creating film is a chance for students to experience a practical and exciting learning environment. You may even look at students entering films in competitions such as ScreenIT, Tropfest Junior, Lenovo zoom or any of the many other film festival competitions that run each year.

Adobe Education Leader

Recently I was contacted by Adobe and invited to be part of their Adobe Education Leader program. This is in recognition of the quality of work in Adobe software that I have been doing at Kingswood High. I do advocate for their products and I do also receive personal material benefits from this program – free personal software and access to professional learning. Creative Cloud software is available to all NSW DEC schools via software request for your school via IT support.