

PERSONALIZING THE ABSTRACT WITH ONLINE VIDEO

DENNIS SMITH AND NONI MATÉ

WATCHING A DOCUMENTARY IN A CLASSROOM SETTING CREATES A COMMON LANGUAGE FOR EXAMINATION OF THE ISSUE, ALL THE MORE EFFECTIVE BECAUSE STUDENTS BECOME EMOTIONALLY ENGAGED IN THE SUBJECT.

FROM ITS EARLIEST DAYS, THE WORLD WIDE WEB HAS DANGLED THE PROMISE of seamless video in front of its online visitors. Until recently, attempts to deliver on that promise have been disappointing. Low bandwidth and enormous file sizes, as well as a confusion of video formats, have frustrated users. Now that high speed connectivity has become more readily available and video applications have become more sophisticated, the Web is beginning to truly achieve its multimedia potential. For educators, these developments mean that video resources that were once difficult, if not impossible, to use in the classroom are now available and the potential for students to become creative collaborators in multimedia production has become a new possibility.

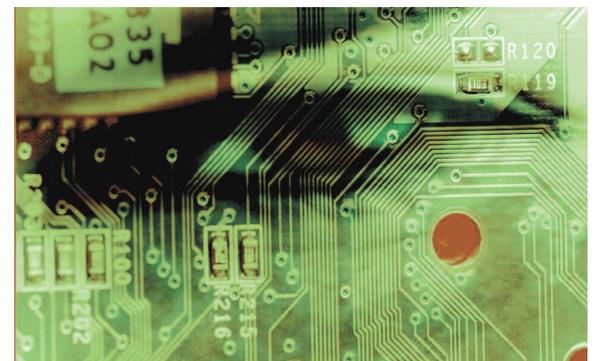
Video offers an immediacy that can stimulate students' thinking. Sharing the experience of a film documentary in a classroom setting, for instance, creates a bridge between the everyday experience of students and unfamiliar new information. The human faces and voices on the screen and the comfortable structure of narrative can personalize abstract issues and give concrete form to complex ideas that traditional text materials often fail to provide. Video has a particular value in setting up a conversation about a subject based on a shared experience that can be both emotionally engaging and intellectually challenging. Once that bridge is established, students may be inspired to investigate ideas and issues more enthusiastically.

Nevertheless, video is underused in classrooms. Most of us have grown up in a video environment. Teachers and students alike receive much, if not most, of our information through television. Yet schools have been extremely slow in incorporating video into teaching practice and curriculum. One reason for this reluctance is that teachers are trained within the traditions of print literacy and feel at sea in the alternate vocabulary of perception known generally as media literacy. A second obstacle has been technological. Schools have always been under-equipped for using and creating film and video. The digital revolution of today means that many students are better equipped to watch and make video through DVD players, home computers and a variety of digital video equipment

than most schools are. That means that teachers can make the computer an integral part of their students' homework, incorporating the video that is available online as a vital new component in their learning and the creation of personal videos as a new medium for student expression.

Canada's two major media institutions, the National Film Board and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, have archived film and television resources since they were established, decades ago. In recent years, they have digitized many of the assets in their collection, and have now organized their digital media in ways that are useful to classroom teachers.

For history teachers, online access to such archived video provides the opportunity to use historic Canadian films as primary documents, in the same way that they use letters, journalistic accounts, and editorial cartoons. The *Documentary Lens* Web site (www.nfb.ca/doclens), created by the National Film Board of Canada, currently contains excerpts from eighty NFB documentaries from the 1930s to the 1990s, with the ability to play the documentaries in full as well. The excerpts are organized by theme, but a Library tool allows teachers or students to sort the excerpts into new categories to suit their curricular needs.





ENBREF Depuis ses débuts, l'Internet incite ses utilisateurs à croire à la possibilité de visualiser des bandes vidéo en continu. Jusqu'à tout récemment, les tentatives en ce sens ont été décevantes. Cependant, au cours des dernières années, la société Radio-Canada et l'Office national du film ont numérisé un grand nombre de leurs ressources archivées et les ont organisées de telle façon qu'elles soient utiles pour le travail en salle de classe. Grâce à ces efforts, le personnel enseignant peut désormais utiliser de nouvelles technologies interactives qui facilitent l'accès aux ressources vidéo en ligne et qui encouragent les élèves à réfléchir d'une façon créative, autonome et critique.

it treats each subject with archival material over a span of time, connecting current events with historical precedents. A subject like "Computer Invasion: A History of Automation in Canada" contains pieces from 1945 to 1993, so that a student can watch the advance of technology and appreciate the effects it has had on Canadian society. Interviews with Marshall McLuhan, among others, demonstrate some of the hopes and misgivings about the advances in media technologies. Teachers of history and social studies, language arts, media studies, and science will find worthwhile resources on the site as well as useful tools, like the personal bookmarks, to make it adaptable to the classroom.

The CBC Archives site is particularly helpful in individualizing assignments for students. Given the remarkable variety of items, teachers can allow students to follow their own interests within the context of a classroom assignment. Given the fact that many students have better access to the Web on their home computers than they do in the school, the CBC site, like the NFB site, may encourage teachers to create flexible assignments that do not rely upon the often limited time and capacity of the school's computer lab or limited classroom access.

For the study of the Second World War, for example, the *Documentary Lens* resources enable students to appreciate the personal context in which civilians lived during the war years. At the time, the NFB documentaries were one of the few sources of news that Canadians received about the war. The excerpts in *Documentary Lens* demonstrate the spirit of the time: they are propaganda for national unity and personal sacrifice, demonstrations of Canada's industrial strength and military preparedness. Unlike textbook descriptions of the period, the films evoke the ethos of the era with all of the fervor the war effort created. Teachers understand that film can create a sense of emotional engagement with the historical situation that stimulates student understanding. Students gain a more realistic sense of what it was like on the home front while they also confront such questions as the use of film as propaganda. Teachers can direct the same type of critical questions regarding author, intent, language and audience as they would to other primary documents.

The *CBC Archives* section of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Web site (archives.cbc.ca) is another doorway into Canadian history and culture. The video and radio excerpts contained in the site are organized in broad themes, with each theme containing a number of discrete collections that include items built around a subject, person or event. Each collection also includes a timeline to place it in historical context, and supplementary information about the subject and each video or radio clip. There are many teaching activities, with new ones appearing weekly.

One of the most valuable aspects of the CBC site is that

Documentary video is also a powerful medium for initiating discussion on current issues. Watching a documentary in a classroom setting creates a common language for examination of the issue, all the more effective because students become emotionally engaged in the subject. The exceptional Canadian site, *Extremis* (www.extremis.tv), includes documentaries on global subjects ranging from child labour in the Philippines to the death penalty in Oklahoma. The site includes significant textual background on the subjects, suggestions and links to encourage students to become personally involved in the issues, and a blog that keeps the issues up to date with current developments. The French version of the site is more complete, but anglophone students and teachers will also find stimulating material for discussion and study.

Social and political advocacy have always been a part of the National Film Board tradition of documentary. *CitizenShift* (citizen.nfb.ca), includes documentaries on current issues and extensive features on the filmmakers who create them. By profiling the filmmakers, the site may assist teachers in drawing their students into critical discussion of the issues and of the ways that documentaries frame our thinking and feeling about them. If students examine the process by which a filmmaker develops a concept, shoots footage and edits it into a finished



WITH THE ADVENT OF SOFTWARE PROGRAMS SUCH AS FLASH, YOUNG PEOPLE ARE DISCOVERING THAT THEY CAN CREATE EFFECTIVE ANIMATED SHORTS WITH RELATIVELY LITTLE GUIDANCE.

film, they can achieve a more objective stance on the documentary that may lead them into critical thinking on the issues themselves. Students step back from the emotional engagement of the film to consider the filmmaker's stated intentions, biases, and cinematic processes.

As accustomed as most teachers are to watching and enjoying video, many are uncomfortable with using film in a classroom setting. Teachers are trained in the language of historical, scientific or literary discourse, but rarely in the visual language of film. *Behind the Camera* is a companion site to *Documentary Lens* that examines facets of documentary film creation, the history of documentary and the vocabulary of film. Excerpts from NFB films are used as illustrations. Activities in the teacher's guide encourage students to examine how filmmakers manipulate cinematic technique and visual vocabulary to create meaning. Activities like these prepare students and teachers to decode films to arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of how skilled filmmakers construct narrative and use the language of film to involve and persuade viewers.

Another aspect of the digital revolution is that film production has become as available as an up-to-date cell phone. The combination of relatively low cost digital video equipment and sophisticated editing software like iMovie

has inspired many students to take up filmmaking. The Web has matched these developments with sites that encourage students to use video as a learning tool and to upload their results for sharing with others.

Two sites developed by The Historica Foundation, *Historica Fairs* (www.historica.ca/fairs) and *YouthLinks* (www.youthlinks.org), solicit student videos on historical and topical themes. Student films on the sites include short docu-dramas and clever animations that dramatize historical events. Many teachers consider video production to be a skill, like research and essay writing, which calls upon students to assemble, manufacture and organize materials creatively and sequentially, and to make critical decisions. Whether students create small documentaries, animated shorts, or brief dramas, uploading their work onto the Web offers them the chance to publish for a wide audience.

The Web has potential interest for social studies, history and language arts teaching, but online video also offers opportunities for fine and performing arts programs. In the past, animation depended upon specialized cameras and extraordinary patience and commitment. With the advent of such software as Flash, young people are discovering that they can create effective animated shorts with relatively little guidance. Digital video equipment allows young users to create stop action animation using plasticine figures, cut paper, or even Lego figures, with surprisingly effective results. Students today can more easily learn from and emulate the great Canadian animators like Norman McLaren, using tools that even McLaren could not imagine.

In addition to the sites mentioned above, students can create their own publishing environments on the Web. One fairly recent phenomenon is the video blog (or vlog), on which users mount their own videos, often in the manner of diaries or personal journals. While some vlogs demonstrate all of the weaknesses of amateur expression, the medium is a viable means for students to share their own work and an authentic model for the creation of more extended forms of video production or collaboration. Two portals to video blogs are *Vlog Map* (www.vlogmap.org) and *Vidblogs* (www.vidblogs.com).

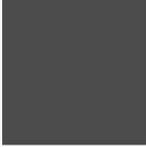
The video blog is one expression of the primary ideal of the Internet: that every user has the potential to become an independent publisher, with the means of communicating in various media at his or her own command without the controlling influence of international media conglomerates, networks, or legislative bodies. For teachers who wish to encourage creative, critical, independent thought in their students, new developments in interactive technologies, including easier access to online video, offer exciting educational opportunities. |

NONI MATÉ is a former high school History teacher and Co-Director of 7th Floor Media, a multi-media lab within Simon Fraser University's Education Faculty.

DENNIS SMITH is a former high school teacher and Creative Director of 7th Floor Media, Simon Fraser University.

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