

Video Term Papers Teach Research and Social Responsibility

In Stoughton, Wisconsin, students who researched controversial topics and presented their results to community forums experienced firsthand the social responsibility of editors and writers.

The images are still vivid in my mind: Julie Gyland and Robert Barnett, students at Stoughton High School, seated with then Governor Tony Earl in the ornate conference room of the Wisconsin State Capitol. Before they came to interview the Governor, Julie and Robert had followed a research trail that led to dozens of people: public officials, scientists, representatives of the media, and families worried about the quality of their drinking water. They had heard more perspectives on toxic waste than we had imagined possible.

Now I was behind the camera, and it was Governor Earl's turn. Somewhat nervously, Julie asked, "As Governor, what is your main goal in cleaning up the waste sites in Stoughton and in our state?"

Earl, the former head of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, responded: "Well, the aim has to be twofold. One has to be looking back at the problems we had and cleaning those up before they cause more problems. But, at the same time, we've got to have a program that is aimed at prevention of these kinds of problems in the future."

Good question, good answer. Real life. Learning about social policy issues directly from the decision makers. Data accumulated on tapes rather than note cards. Research projects designed to foster community awareness and civic responsibility. And, given the fact that thousands of people would see the results, certainly more useful than most student research.

The Video Term Paper Idea

It all started when students in my Contemporary Political Issues class asked whether they could pursue an alternative to a traditional term paper as a class project, intrigued by a story about how student research in suburban Maryland had triggered action on a local environmental problem. My students wanted to make a difference, too; they wondered whether they could make videotapes for the news program produced by the journalism class for the local cable television station, WSTO-TV. Soon, the idea of a video term paper began to germinate.

Fortunately, my experiences in media production gave me some practical insights into the can of worms we



Photograph by Steven E. Landfried

might be opening. As a result, we carefully examined the pros and cons of working on video term papers. The first challenge was equipment. Where would we get a quality video camera, a portable VCR deck, good microphones, and editing equipment? Two days later the kids had the answer: they'd gotten permission to use community equipment through WSTO, as available, on a sign-up basis; district video equipment would be used as a back-up. To address the liability matter of going into the community unsupervised, the students got permission slips for the project from their parents. Fortunately, the students had ready access to automobiles, so transportation posed no major problems for us either. Finally, there was the matter of time. I indicated they would probably have to come in during evenings and weekends to finish their projects. They said they would (and they did), so we decided to push ahead.

Research in Action

The maiden voyage of the high-tech term paper was anything but smooth; we had to modify our course as we went along. Basically, the project went through five, sometimes overlapping phases: topic selection, community research, videotape production, editing, and dissemination.

Topic Selection

The students' first task was to identify potential topics they might like to research in depth. After brainstorming, the class focused on narrowing the choices to accessible and carefully defined issues with immediate relevance for others in the community. Eventually, student groups formed to prepare video term papers on these issues:

- controversial school board cuts of a music teacher and counseling positions at the high school just before the fall semester began;
- prevailing myths about Cambodian immigrants in town, which had

been elevated to the level of truth in the minds of many students and parents (Stoughton had the second highest per capita influx of Cambodian refugees of any city in the state during the 1970-80s);

- alleged footdragging by local government, the state, and federal governments in submitting three local toxic waste sites to the Superfund list.

Community Research

In the search for sources, legal pads and telephone books became as useful as index cards and card catalogues are for library research. The students soon discovered that few government offices open before nine o'clock and then adapted by making calls during study halls or immediately after school. To their dismay, they also encountered problems in getting through the secretaries to certain elected officials and high level bureaucrats. I then organized role-playing sessions so class members could learn "telephone diplomacy." Within a couple of days the kids had booked a month's worth of interviews.

With the help of the host of "The Wisconsin Magazine" (a statewide public television program), students learned effective questioning and interview techniques. They critiqued their own videotaped practice interviews for content and nonverbal behaviors before they went out for their first interviews. Thus, they went into their interviews knowing (1) what information or perspective was needed from each, (2) what questions they were going to ask, and (3) how to listen for and follow up on "scoops" that might come their way.

Then, in post-interview feedback sessions, the young people received constructive ideas for improving their interview questions and techniques. I encouraged them to remind interviewees that, if things got rough or uncomfortable, they were neophytes.

The students found themselves getting ever deeper into the complexities of life as they dug into issues and politics involved in toxic waste, school district and governmental decision making, and intercultural rela-



Robert Barnett and Julie Gyland of Stoughton High School interview then Governor Tony Earl about toxic waste in their community and the state—a momentous event in a long chain of instructive activities leading to their group's production of a video term paper on that topic.

tions. So it was not surprising that—like any careful library researcher trying to keep notecards straight—they discovered that data management is a necessary prerequisite to meaningful analysis. Before long, they learned the importance of maintaining careful logs of the main points and prime quotations from each interview, as well as the names and vocational titles of their sources.

Because the topics were local and contemporary, the students found the files of local newspapers and television stations much more useful than those of the high school or public library. However, the class did not ignore library research, which was needed, for example, to understand the influx of Cambodians to the U.S. in the 1970s or the history of the Superfund program. They also found local public and university libraries useful for background information on elected officials. And learning about toxic waste sent them to their chemistry books!

Videotape Production

At first we hoped that students would handle all aspects of the production; however, their video photography skills were so varied that I agreed to do the camera work to ensure that no group was penalized for lack of photographic skills. This decision created more work for me but was something we were thankful for in the editing room.

As soon as we had videotape to review and catalogue, another award-winning television producer shared insights into how to conceptualize stories, select visual images and sound bytes, sequence material, prepare effective transitions (segues), and write and read script. Screenings of his videos provided students with examples of quality work, and his reactions to some of our raw footage provided students with many ideas about what they could do—or avoid—in future taping and editing.

Each group accumulated about eight hours of half-inch VHS videotape over six weeks. After each taping session, students would carefully record information in logs during class time or at home. Logs included the tape number, the interviewee or scene, counter numbers, a brief summary of the material on the tape, and asterisks

next to particularly pithy or appealing sections. Separate logs were kept for "wild footage" (visuals without sync sound).

Eventually, content themes emerged, and students created topical subsections in three-ring binders, which allowed them to collect in one place all available material on a particular subject such as school board reasons for staff cuts or taxpayers for and against the cuts. They would then review each section as they began to develop topical sequences or write narration for each "chapter" of the video term paper.

Editing

The real "writing" of the video term paper began after eight weeks, when the students stood back from all the material they'd recorded and got an overview of how the pieces of their research puzzle interrelated. Indeed, what they found was that they had too many quality pieces for a 5–10 minute feature. They decided to invest more time so a complete view of their findings could emerge—in a 40–50 minute feature.

We discussed editing techniques before the students actually entered the editing room; however, they soon found that the aesthetics of sequencing moving pictures is best learned by experience. For example, when they saw the sadness in the eyes of a Cambodian woman explaining why her family left their homeland, they began to appreciate how a good picture is worth a thousand words. Having to repeatedly run and rerun segments brought the students into intimate contact with interviewees, the content of what they were saying, and whether nonverbal behavior belied the verbal message in any way. Few people read and reread books, but editing videotape certainly caused my students to review the fruits of their research over and over.

The editing process taught many other lessons: that the same words mean different things to different people, that interesting speakers aren't necessarily pleasing to look at, and that attractive people may have nothing of substance to say. Perhaps more important, students learned about the power of editors to influence perceptions of reality, the ability to stand

truth on its head or make someone look foolish. Given the important local issues each group was addressing, it was with a certain trepidation that they made decisions about the number of speakers or the amount of time to be given to particular positions.

As foot after foot of original videotape was transferred to 3/4-inch master tape and students reviewed their work for content, timing, and feel, they became increasingly aware of their responsibility to present a balanced and accurate report of their research. They were also beginning to recognize that the various audiences would probably make judgments on the basis of what they saw rather than what they heard.

Writing/delivering narration. Nonetheless, the power of words—particularly the ability of the narrator to review, emphasize, and guide the viewer—was not lost in the shuffle. The students wanted an active role in script writing and some input into how their teammates delivered the narration. In addition, they began to appreciate the value of having the student narrator summarize things for long-winded speakers and the "um-ers" and "ah-ers." Real motivation for writing developed.

Working on scripts taught students how to vary their writing styles. For example, opening sections of the narration required longer informative sentences than did the transitions that connected one section to another or simply introduced new speakers. Students also learned to resist the temptation to have narration do the talking rather than the people interviewed.

Similarly, the narrators (often kids with acting experience who welcomed the challenge) found they had to adjust their style of delivery to fit the context within the report. They also had to distinguish between summarizing other people's views or drawing their own conclusions about the myths regarding Cambodians, the responses to actions on toxic waste problems, or the staffing decisions made at an annual school district meeting on a very hot evening in July.

The final touches. Eventually the time came to wrap up the loose ends in production process, including taping and editing the narration, adding

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the credits, and transferring the master tape to professional quality videotape. Four months after we had begun, we all breathed a sigh of relief when everything looked fine after a final screening. The next step was to share the videos with the local community and wider audiences.

Information Dissemination

To facilitate community discussion about the issues, we implemented a four-part strategy for dissemination, including media coverage, community forums at the high school, local cable broadcasts, and distribution of the tapes to educational organizations and to appropriate legislative committees at the state and federal levels. The high-tech term papers generated much newspaper and broadcast coverage, and attendance at the forums was good.

Project Outcomes

Within two years, the following developments occurred:

- The Stoughton school board reversed its decision to reduce student services positions at the high school and hired a third counselor and a full-time school psychologist for the next year.

- Three of the four toxic waste sites studied were added to the federal Superfund list, the fourth was nominated for listing.

- An agreement for cleaning up the Hagen site was reached with Uniroyal and Waste Management Corporation.

- Understanding and empathy for Cambodians in Stoughton increased appreciably; racial slurs and snide comments about the Cambodians decreased at Stoughton High School.

The Stoughton students felt understandable pride in these outcomes; this multifaceted endeavor was a significant learning experience. For example, college student Tammy Holtan says: "The project taught me about logic, how to look at something we didn't know much about and how to study it in an organized, problem-solving approach." Robert Barnett, who now produces public affairs programs for WSTO, notes: "I think it made me more alert to social issues

and to ask *why* questions a lot. More than anything, doing the research taught me not to take everything local officials tell you at face value." Another alumni of the project, Missie Pugh, observes: "The people part of it was best for me! I learned how to call people cold and then talk to them at length, how to interview people, and how to handle myself as an adult."

Tapping Positive Potential

The traditional term paper is no longer particularly relevant or useful, if it ever was. Macrorie did not overstate the case when he said, "No one outside school ever writes anything called themes. Apparently they are teachers' exercises, not really a form of communication" (1986). Visual media play a dominant role in molding lifestyles, thinking, and perceptions today, even more so now than when McLuhan wrote, "The classroom is now in a vital struggle for survival with the immensely persuasive 'outside' world created by new informational media" (1986).

Schools can continue to treat the media as something to study or something to use. The video term paper allows us to do both. And by using the media to develop research, thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills in our students, we can begin to tap the positive potential of media, which otherwise try so hard to manipulate us. □

References

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