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
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);

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 relations.
trying to keep notecards straight
they discovered that data manage
vocational titles of their sources
they learned the importance of main
positions. So it was not surprising that
like any careful library researcher
and prime quotations from each in
terview, 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 tele-
vision 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 Super-
fund 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 sto-
rries, select visual images and sound
bytes, sequence material, prepare
effective transitions (segués), and
write and read script. Screenings of his
videos provided students with exam-
les 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 al-
lowed them to collect in one place all
available material on a particular sub-
ject 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 topi-
cal 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 find-
ings could emerge—in a 40–50 minute
feature.

We discussed editing techniques be-
fore the students actually entered the
editing room; however, they soon
found that the aesthetics of sequen-
cing moving pictures is best learned by
experience. For example, when they
saw the sadness in the eyes of a Cam-
bodian 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 vide-
tape 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 peo-
ples, that interesting speakers aren’t
necessarily pleasing to look at, and
that attractive people may have noth-
ing of substance to say. Perhaps more
important, students learned about the
power of editors to influence percep-
tions 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 video-
tape was transferred to 3/4-inch master
tape and students reviewed their work
for content, timing, and feel, they be-
came increasingly aware of their re-
sponsibility 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**. None-
theless, the power of words—par-
ticularly the ability of the narrator to re-
view, 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 stu-
dent 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 nar-
ration required longer informative
sentences than did the transitions that
connected one section to another or
simply introduced new speakers. Stu-
dents also learned to resist the temp-
tation 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 ad-
just their style of delivery to fit the
context within the report. They also
had to distinguish between summariz-
ing 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 an-
nual 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 tap-
ing 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 not to take everything local officials tell you at face value." Another alumna 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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