
Literacy Gains Through Digital Documentaries: A Photo Essay

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"The greatest part about this is that we didn't have to write, because I don't like to write"
– Fourth-Grade Study Participant

Background of the Study

In the spring of 2011, I met with an elementary teacher who described the challenges she faced when meeting the curriculum pacing guidelines set by her school district. She explained how she felt a great deal of pressure to address a wide range of content standards within a relatively short period of time due mostly to constraints of high-stakes testing. She then mentioned a possible solution to this dilemma. Her idea became the basis for this study.

To address these same curriculum expectations, her grade level team members had collectively agreed to carry out a thematic unit in which students would research and write a descriptive report about an animal. The grade level (i.e., lead) teacher set the parameters for the team: a) the unit would address English Language Arts content standards that pertain to writing and research, and Science standards that address animal habitat and adaptations; b) the teacher would choose the animal for each student (to ensure that multiple students did not research the same animal; and c) students would write (in booklet form that includes pictures) a report on their animal to be displayed to parents and eventually placed in their writing portfolio as evidence of meeting a wide range of fourth- grade content standards.

The teacher in this study explained how she could not agree to carry out a thematic unit with the parameters agreed upon by the other teachers. When asked why, she gave two compelling reasons: 1) As the teacher in a co-taught setting, several students in her class have exceptionalities that could present unique challenges to effectively carry out this project and 2) it did not seem

like an engaging activity that would promote active learning and critical thinking. To be more specific, "...it didn't sound fun. I mean, seriously, what fourth-grade student wants to write a nine page research report on an animal they didn't even choose?"(Field notes, March 16, 2011).

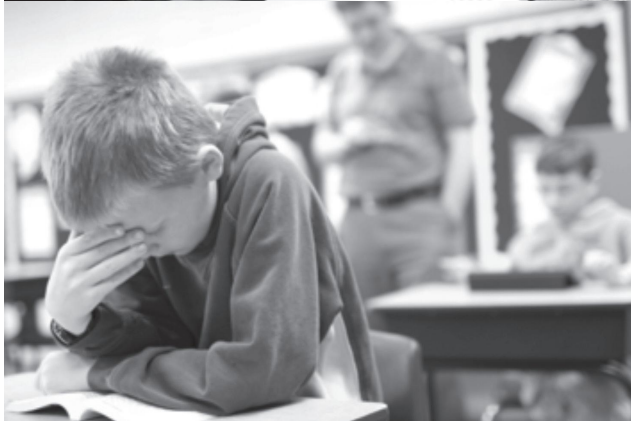
Out of this discussion came the idea to address the same content standards in a way that promoted digital literacy, student engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking. To accomplish this, the teacher explained to her students that they would research an animal and then write a script to eventually create a student-directed digital-based documentary. Also, the teacher allowed students the choice of what animal to research.

I, Brent Daigle, was fortunate to observe this process from the initial stages to the completion of each student-created video. Donna Lester Taylor and Jabari Cain agreed to help with the documentation and analysis of data from this project. Donna has a comprehensive background in research-based literacy approaches, particularly for students in at-risk populations. Jabari has an extensive background in educational technology and instructional design, especially within the context of classroom use and student engagement.

All of the necessary permissions to display images of students and the videos they created were obtained prior to the study. Additionally, permission was sought and granted by the Institutional Review Board from both the school district and Mercer University prior to the investigation.

The following images and descriptions provide an overview of each stage in this literacy-based thematic unit. All of the student videos can be seen at: <http://vimeo.com/channels/animalproject>.

Step 1: Student Choice and Gathering Information



Students were given the objectives of the unit: to research an animal of their choice for the eventual creation of a digital documentary about their animal. Students were then given time to decide upon an animal to research (their choice often came after student collaboration and teacher-directed classroom discussion).

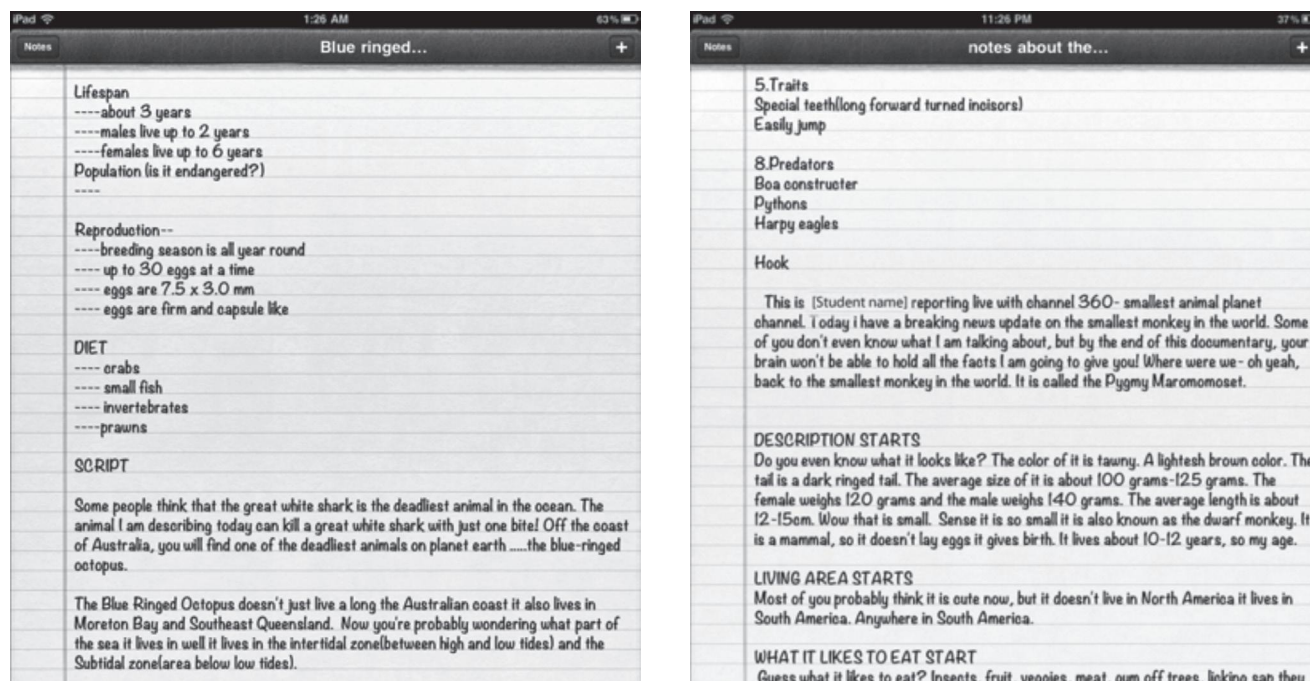
Pictured here, students found resources and information about their animal. Some students chose to work independently on this task, while others collaborated with each other to help organize and discuss the relevance of their findings for their respective animal.

Step 2: Technology



Students had access to Apple computer products throughout the duration of this project. Jabari Cain, designated in 2011 as an Apple Distinguished Educator, offered his assistance to help meet the technology demands of this thematic unit. Although students had access to current technology, it should be noted that any classroom computer with standard moviemaking software (e.g., Moviemaker, iMovie) can be used to carry out this activity. The specific technology used in this study was: A) Apple iPod Touch 4th Generation; B) Apple iPad 3g; C) Apple iPad 2; D) MacBook Air; E) MacBook Pro; F) iMovie.

Step 3: Organizing Key Information and Writing Script



After choosing their animal, students began to research and organize information about their animal. They used the notebook app on the iPad to organize the information they found from their research. Eventually, this information was reorganized into “chapters” for later inclusion into their script. Students worked with the teacher and collaboratively with one another to decide upon chapter headings to include for their narrative. Many students had similar chapter headings (e.g., habitat, characteristics), while others created additional chapters unique to their animal (e.g., silly facts).

Pictured here are early versions of pre-writing drafts from two separate students. Notice that in the example on the left, the student took a straight-forward, facts-based approach to tell about the animal. In the example on the right, the student presented information about the animal within the framework of the a newscast. Ultimately, it was the decision of each student to determine chapter headings and information to include in their final draft and eventually into their documentary.

Step 4: Creating the Digital Documentary



After writing the script, students began to create their digital documentary. First, they recorded their script into an MP3 format. Next, they searched the Internet for images and videos about their animal. The last step of the process included importing the recording of the script and the images into iMovie. Students aligned their recording with images and videos of their animal. Students

had complete control over the movie making process. The teacher and researchers offered assistance only when the technology presented a challenge (ie., too advanced for their skills).

Pictured on the previous page, students organized the images, voice recording, and animal videos for their digital documentary. On the left, a student shows Dr. Taylor where the images will appear in relation to her script. In the middle, a student found similar images and is deciding which one to include in his documentary. On the right, a student works with Dr. Cain to create a special effect that he wanted to place in the middle of his documentary.

Conclusion

For the students in this study, the digital documentary thematic unit seemed to improve student achievement in the areas of social interactions, writing efficacy, and learning outcomes. Four underlying themes seemed to emerge throughout this investigation: 1) student satisfaction, 2) intrinsic motivation, 3) student self-efficacy, and 4) technology engagement.

Students who participated in this study were all in the fourth grade and represented a wide range of abilities. The group consisted of five boys and three girls. Of the eight students:

- 2 are in gifted programs.
- 2 receive special education services for learning disabilities.
- 1 receives special education services for Autism.
- 1 receives special education services for Other Health Impairment.
- 2 are in the general fourth grade student population.

Interviews with the teacher and students report a high level of satisfaction throughout the three week unit. The teacher stated, “this time of year, we would have sometimes have unexpected changes to our schedule. After we began this unit, the students soon began to ask each morning ‘are we having reading groups today’ ... they were very disappointed on the days that I told them we would not be able to meet” (Field notes, March 29, 2011).

Students also enjoyed this activity because “[we] didn’t have to write” (Field notes, April 4, 2011). Many students did not connect the embedded literacy tasks within this activity to the larger goals of the thematic unit. Student motivation remained high throughout this project because of the daily technology use and social interactions. Student reports indicate that literacy

outcomes were secondary to these other factors (Field notes, April 4, 2011).

Students felt empowered to conduct their research in this project without the burden that a lack of skill with pen and paper can create. One of the participants, a student who receives special education services because of a learning disability, explained “Words come hard for me,” but then indicated that the computer helped him because “it makes suggestions for words...when I was writing I learned more juicy words” (Field notes, March 29, 2011). Another student indicated that she struggles with grammar but did not have to worry about the grammar part while she was writing her script because it wouldn’t be seen. A third student commented about how much his friend in the class enjoyed this activity because, “he can type faster than he can write with a pencil” [so he doesn’t lose his thoughts]. (Field notes, March 29, 2011). The students were proud of their work when it was done and seemed to feel a strong sense of empowerment in their ability to conduct research. As one participant stated, “When I watched it, it was good...yeah, I was proud” (Field notes, March 29, 2011).

This approach to a thematic unit meets the curriculum goals set by the school district and seems to improve overall student outcomes. In addition to meeting English Language Arts and Science standards, the teacher was also able to address fourth- grade technology standards within the context of this activity. Student choice, teacher guidance, and ongoing student collaboration were essential components to the success of this project. With clearly defined expectations, sufficient time to allow student involvement, and use of existing classroom (or school lab) computers, this project can be adapted into an existing literacy activity or across multiple content areas.

Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.

—FREDERICK DOUGLASS

