International Student Media Festival: How Media Production Enhances Learning for Children and Youth

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The International Student Media Festival (ISMF) is a three-day event that includes workshops, winning entry screenings and an awards ceremony. Since its creation in 1974, the festival has become one of the largest of its kind. Sponsored by the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (ACET), ISMF invites young people to travel to cities—such as Orlando, FL, Anaheim, CA, Dallas and Louisville, KY—to demonstrate skills in media production in several different categories.[1]

The categories are planned to ensure representation from a variety of multimedia formats using available resources in most K-16 institutions. For example, the sequential skills category lets students design, develop and present the results of an inquiry-based learning project. Students must analyze information, evaluate sources for usefulness and synthesize a body of knowledge to design a sequential presentation. Logic and critical thinking are also needed to plan an appropriate sequence of slides.

In the single photograph category, students document, enhance, reveal—even criticize—the subject presented in a photograph. Taken to an even higher level, photographic essay category gives a deeper, fuller, more rounded, more intense view of the subject than any single photograph could.[2] Multimodal learning and digital literacy are less about tools and more about thinking.[3] Thus, projects submitted to ISMF provide a forum for students to submit some of their best thinking and problem-solving skills.

During the festival, there are opportunities for students to describe how they and their teachers work together to impact teaching and learning. These enduring educational experiences are based on constructivist learning theory, which adds value to media production in the classroom.

Constructivist learning environments.

Educators have long embraced constructivist theories that lead to authentic learning environments. Students construct understanding of concepts and ideas through personal learning activities.[4-6] Teachers know students learn best by doing, and doing is connected to a child's known world. People learn as they semantically relate what they see, hear and feel to earlier experiences in their lives. Still-image production, sound bytes and motion media are excellent modes of communication for demonstrating the construction of new knowledge.[7]

Learning becomes authentic

Students must be able to connect abstract concepts with authentic experiences in their own lives. Meaningful context makes semantic understanding possible.[8] Although people may loosely apply the meaning of context to any hands-on activity, the true meaning of context for a particular event is personal and unique for every individual. Media production leads to understanding of events related to life experiences, making context more clearly defined.

The category for live-action motion media is one example of how students become immersed in a particular topic of interest. Through video, perspective is altered to change the way an individual thinks and acts.[9] Projects developed in the live action category are powerful tools for teaching perspective, attitude and viewpoint.

Understanding begins at direct contact with information, data collection and data manipulation.[10] Media production is a method for learning about other things, whether it's processes in science, causes for historical events or artistic form in the image of a sunset.

Learning becomes meaningful because it is used for a reason. Projects submitted as interactive stills or websites make the best use of databases, online resources and print materials to plan informational presentations. The focus is on hypermedia and the linking of ideas through interactive websites or interactive multimedia presentations.

Systematic processes, teamwork

Media projects should be associated with curriculum content standards, along with accountability for achievement of objectives. Using a systematic design approach is important. There are several educational models for planning and producing media.[11-13] Basic tenets within each model include:

- Selection of a topic or research question.
- Identification of information sources.
- Negotiation of group processes.
- Actual production of artifacts, including storyboarding and editing.
- Evaluation of final products. Using systematic design, students are able to develop a logical, self-regulated thought process.

Using a team approach is an important skill for the 21st century workforce.[14] Students learn negotiation, interdependence and an ethic of mutual support when working collaboratively on a media production project. The processes associated with group dynamics are an important advantage to media production teams in which dialogue and idea exchange are facilitated by the project sponsor. What an individual believes often changes when various perspectives and ideas are exchanged through group dialog.

ISMF and higher-level learning

Halverson and Gibbons reported case studies of youth groups who designed and developed motion-media projects.[15] In their research, each case included basic attributes for the video production process. Students benefited from using multimodal digital literacy practices that required generating story ideas and by creating a multimedia representation of those ideas.[16] Students wrote narratives, developed appreciation for art and beauty, and examined classic literary works. ISMF project guidelines are based on this, and similar studies recommend using multimedia as a tool to enhance student learning.

Teachers' professional growth is also evident through artifacts, interviews and news reports describing participants' excitement and commitment at each year's festival.[17] Special recognition for teachers is offered through several different awards.

The Connelly Award is given to a classroom teacher, media or technology specialist who has demonstrated noteworthy commitment to using student-produced media. These dedicated and talented teachers and specialists encourage students to design creative projects aligned with state and national curriculum standards.

One example comes from the 2009 award winner, Joan Goble from Cannelton Elementary School. Goble makes best use of available resources in the design of student-produced websites by reporting on special research projects. Students follow a systematic process for identifying a topic or research question, locating and evaluating resources to support their research and creating web pages to report outcomes from their research. Her students' award-winning presentation can be viewed at www.siec.k12.in.us/cannelton/iditarod.

In another example, Jeff Rudkin and his middle school students were recognized in 2007 for a creative live action video production of "Oliver Twist." Creativity requires deep knowledge

of a subject, which leads to a unique interpretation of an idea or event. Through productions such as this, students become intimately involved in literary classics.

Younger students have the opportunity to work with teachers and parents in developing media projects. Seven-year old Elizabeth LeBlanc, the 2009 award winner, took a trip with her family to Washington, D.C., and decided to capture video clips of famous places she visited. Her video collection evolved into a video documentary called "Adventure to Famous American Places." She won local and state competitions, and carried through by submitting her project to the ISMF in Louisville, KY.

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