

Student Video Projects

Student video projects are a fantastic way of putting language learning into the hands of your students. By having them write, shoot and edit their own films, students are not only intellectually challenged, but they report a higher level of motivation because of the creative, personalized nature of the project. In building linguistic competence, they also gain confidence in their language abilities. Students often report having fun with the language, since they are able to use it in a non-classroom-specific context that feels more “real”; this extended group work also results in a greater sense of class community. Finally, in exploring the genre of cinema and becoming proficient in a new technology, students engage in an interdisciplinary project that reflects the goals of many of our schools and universities, which can help you find the technical and administrative support necessary for a successful project!

While the basic goals of most video projects will be similar, student-created films can be used in a variety of ways in the FL classroom. Students can create an advertisement, generate a newscast, demonstrate or teach a concept, tell a story, recreate an historical event, construct an autobiography, make a documentary, and so on, with each idea reflecting a different level of involvement by both faculty and students. In addition to assessing initial project goals, then, there are several factors to consider when it comes to planning such a project:

- length of the film desired (2 minutes for an ad or 10 to tell a story?)
- location of shooting (will students film in a classroom, on campus, or out in their community?)
- involvement in editing process (how much will you encourage creative editing and special effects?)
- time devoted to project (considerable classroom time and student meetings are needed to support the development of such a project – how flexible is your syllabus?)
- technical support (can your language lab or technical staff train and consult with students on filming and editing?)
- archiving (what will you do to showcase the finished products? a web site? a film festival? DVDs?)

Sample project: We piloted such a video project this fall at Duke University. Students across all six sections of the fourth-semester advanced-intermediate French language course created 8-10 minute *courts métrages* based on texts we analyzed in class. Working in self-selected groups of 3 or 4 (depending on class size), each student was expected to engage in all aspects of the process, from script-writing to filming to editing. The specific assignment was to retell or update a story that we had studied; by relating the films to the course content, students thus sharpened their reading skills by closely rereading texts for character details. Groups were given considerable freedom in how they adapted texts: one chose to update an 18th century African legend to reflect a local basketball rivalry, another adapted Maupassant’s “La Parure” by changing Mathilde into a work-study student who borrows a wealthy student’s fake Rolex for a party (only to lose it), while another documented how the *Petit Nicolas* characters had grown up and were coping at the university. Despite this creative latitude, students were expected to stick to certain rules: to make concrete allusions to the texts studied in class, to incorporate relevant vocabulary, and to stay in character. Their scripts were approximately 5 pages, which allowed time for extended dialogue between characters as well as short music clips and panning shots.

Individual classes voted on their best films, which were presented at a film festival that was attended by all sections of the course. Students were encouraged to dress up and were surprised to find the auditorium transformed into a film festival atmosphere, complete with red carpet, paparazzi, and sparkling cider and desserts. Faculty judges voted on the best film in a variety of categories (*prix d'interprétation féminine, meilleur scénario*, etc), with local restaurants and cinemas donating prizes to winning students.

This unit on filmmaking is embedded in the context of the course, which focuses on how texts are interpreted through different mediums. During the first part of the semester, students read a variety of texts (cartoons, songs, poems, short stories, films, a novel), which have been chosen for the multiple ways in which they can be pedagogically exploited: for grammar, for thematic content, and for the availability of an audio or video version of the text. To help prepare students for the film work they do later in the semester, we digitized audio or visual excerpts of each text so students would begin to work on textual adaptation and representation; our goal here was to bring the texts alive by having students access more of their senses when they read. In addition to reading several *Petit Nicolas* short stories, for instance, they also listened to the stories read aloud and analyzed Sempé's drawings of certain scenes. When we read the novel *M. Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran*, they completed listening comprehension exercises based on audio clips read by the author and then analyzed video clips of the cinematic version. These additional versions of the texts not only reinforced what students had read, but also provided discussion points about what is added by the reader of the text.

Logistics: When students began the cinema project, then, they were used to thinking about the variety of ways in which a text may be adapted. After an introduction to cinema and its vocabulary (looking at *prises de vue*, special effects, and so on), students began to work on their own scripts. In-class time was devoted to script-writing and storyboarding, to give direction and save time when it came to shooting the film. Students then sent their scripts to their instructors, who provided written feedback and grammar corrections. Several days later, groups met with their instructors for 30-minute meetings to read their scripts aloud and correct any pronunciation errors, as well as go over any questions about the storyboard (where to insert songs, titles, and any special effects such as split screen shots or flashbacks). All meetings were conducted in French. After this meeting with the instructor, students were ready to begin filming. Many stayed on campus to film their shorts, but some students ventured as far as the airport to capture a character arriving on campus.

Technical Support: Our Center for Instructional Technology supported the project with a digital video grant. Each group of students received a camera and tripod for two weeks, as well as a hard drive so they could work on different computers throughout campus. Students edited their movies using the Mac iMovie program, which was available at various computer clusters throughout campus. We spent one 50-minute class period training students on camera use and introducing them to general editing skills. After this initial session, students worked on their own, but were able to consult with language lab and multimedia staff members for help with editing and burning their final projects onto DVD.

Assessment: Grades were based on quality of script and storyboard, grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation, interpretation of their character, and technical aspects of the film. Students

received graded feedback throughout the project as well as a final grade. They were also required to complete a final evaluation of their group, which helped to tease out any problems or imbalances that may have occurred during group work.

Outcomes and Challenges: While the technology learning curve was surprisingly easy to overcome, the tendency for students to procrastinate did create some challenges for them. We circumvented much of this by having groups complete parts of the project on a time-sensitive calendar, but there was no way to control the filming, and some groups reported staying up all night to edit their movies. For the teaching faculty, it was important to be highly organized and yet remain flexible: some students needed significantly more help on pronunciation, so meetings went longer, and in some cases students submitted digital oral recordings for additional feedback. Other groups needed more direction and had to significantly rewrite their scripts, meaning more grading. Finally, some students took to improvisation while filming, which meant that the level of language produced did not match our expectations. Despite these minor challenges, both faculty and students were extremely positive about the project, proud in particular of the way students synthesized course materials and language to develop a product of their own creation.

For an article on the video project and the winning video, please see:

<http://www.dukenews.duke.edu/2006/12/clotaire.html>

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