

## Lights, Camera, Active Learning! Enhancing ESL Instruction Through Video Projects

by Eduardo Honold

As a woman absentmindedly wheels her cart around a supermarket aisle she bumps into another woman's cart causing a bottle of oil to spill onto the floor. A brief argument ensues as both women accuse each other of causing the mishap. After the store manager is called to the scene, she invites the women to discuss the situation in her office and the problem is resolved amicably. Is this a scene for a made-for-TV movie? No. It's one of the many video projects that adult ESL students at Socorro ISD have been developing through their participation in an EL Civics pilot program over the past three years. This program, which seeks to evaluate best practices for ESL in this border community, uses student video projects as an exciting new strategy to enhance English language acquisition and to develop transferable technological and workplace skills. As a teacher with no previous experience with video production, I was surprised how quickly students learned to storyboard, write, shoot, and edit a wide range of video projects. More importantly, the process of making a video provided my students with great opportunities to engage in active learning and to develop valuable skills such as problem solving, working cooperatively, and communicating effectively with others. I am convinced that any adult ESL teacher can, with only a little training and the proper equipment (A DV format video camera, a firewire cable, video editing software, and a computer) reach similar results in his or her classroom. Here is a brief sampling of these projects (a more detailed explanation of these projects and some samples of these videos can be found at <http://www.bordercivics.org>).

*Multimedia Poems:* students wrote poems about their experiences living on the border, illustrated them with appropriate pictures or clip art for a PowerPoint that also included a video of each student reading his or her poem.

*Self-interviews:* Students taped interviews of each other concerning their lives on the border. They wrote their own questions and answers, and edited the interviews.

*Field Trips:* Students prepared questions about the place they are going to visit (art museum, library, etc.) and tried to answer them on camera.

*Community Service:* Students taped their own efforts to help in the community by singing Christmas carols in an elder care facility.

*How-to Videos:* Students demonstrated a special skill such as changing the coolant in a car or writing checks in front of the camera.

*Problem-Solving Videos:* After discussing a variety of every day problems (e.g. breaking a bottle of oil at the store) students storyboard and shot a video that illustrated the problem.

*Newscast:* Students simulated a complete local newscast including news stories about their community, weather, sports, commercials and public service announcements.

The length and complexity of these projects ranged from a few class sessions to 3 weeks in the case of the newscast. In my class we began with simple projects such as adding a video box to PowerPoint poems. Once the students became more comfortable with the equipment, we allowed them to shoot more complex videos outside the classroom without supervision. Although this required a leap of faith on our part, none of the equipment was ever damaged or lost. The more complex projects such as the problem-solving videos and the newscast benefited from the use of storyboarding techniques that encouraged students to plan out the narrative of their video from scene to scene using hand drawn pictures and some of the dialogue.

Teacher training was an essential component to the success of these video projects. As part of the ESL Civics pilot program, teachers received ongoing support from consultants, Heide Wrigley and Jim Powrie, on ways to incorporate technology into the ESL classroom. From a curriculum standpoint, teachers learned to encourage students to take risks in using their language skills and to bring the outside world into the classroom with a variety of print and Internet resources. Although teachers in Socorro participated in hands-on training on the basics of making and editing videos, most of us learned these skills by trial and error in a "just in time" basis, meaning that a particular skill was mastered by the students and the teachers only when it was required to complete a project. Because the teachers often did not feel like video "experts," they worked collaboratively with the students.

The benefits of these projects have been particularly evident for intermediate and advanced ESL students who have found a safe and exciting way to display their talents to a larger public. They have shared their work with lower level students in the class and participated in a large student showcase attended by various adult programs in our district. My students' self-confidence in their ability to use English effectively was significantly enhanced after their work was presented in a cable public access channel program and in various local, regional, and national adult education conferences. Ultimately, video projects work because they allow students to develop an exciting product they can share with others while engaging in basic reading, writing, speaking, and effective language acquisition. I hope teachers and administrators will be convinced that a rather modest investment in equipment and training can yield visible results in terms of student motivation, attendance, and assessment.

## References

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