TECHNOLOGY

Multimedia Assignments: Not Just for Film Majors Anymore

Randy Lyhus for The Chronicle

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Millennials are often called "digital natives" because their familiarity with new technology seems to be in their DNA. Whether we like it or not, the "screen age" is here to stay—and with it has come a much more media-rich information ecosystem. Students are exposed to thousands of images a day. They share their own visual content via social-networking sites on their mobile devices, and orchestrate their own daily soundtracks with a portable music player and headphones. Yet too often their scholastic output more closely resembles that of their parents' generation: a series of written words on a page.

While writing should indeed remain a part of a student's overall academic experience (especially as writing proficiency seems to be slipping), millennials are living less and less of their lives with the printed page, thus alienating their written scholarship from other areas of their lives. The question "When will I ever use this?" creeps in as yet another paper is written the night before, just like the last one, only ever to be read by one other set of eyes. So why not integrate more audiovisual content into the classroom—not merely during lectures and presentations but also in student assignments?

There are at least three reasons your next syllabus should include some multimedia-production assignment in addition to the standard term paper and final exam.

1. Media production engages a variety of skills and learning styles. While research papers indeed measure a student's ability to compile data and rhetoric into a coherent synthesis, media-production assignments can include many of these same challenges in visual-spatial ways. Students who sometimes struggle to find the right word may well excel at assembling images to illustrate their points (and perhaps to greater effect). Media production could also involve collaboration, potentially enriching the research experience by facilitating teamwork.

2. Media production can deepen students' engagement in their topic. Many semesters, students will crank out a number of papers. The process itself can become rote, formulaic, and, even if the content is original, the process has been rehearsed since grade school. But consider a visual adaptation of that same paper. Challenging students to take their written work, read it aloud to create an audio recording, and add visual illustrations of their existing words may spur new thinking on the topic. Yes, you wrote a great paper, but what could it *look* like? What could it *sound* like?

3. Media production is highly "shareable" long after final grades are posted. I am fond of telling my students that they aren't likely to share their term papers with friends (at the risk of straining their friendships), but just might share their final video projects. For the same reasons students may find a media-production assignment more engaging to create, their peers may find the same assignment more interesting to review. The final

class could be a screening of student work that reflects their scholarship. Long after the course, students could still be sharing their completed media assignments, cultivating a culture of interest that goes beyond the original class roster. Expect to see more students enroll next semester upon learning about the course through their peers' completed projects.

Your students are digital natives, remember? With any luck, they'll be teaching you how to trim a video or edit down an audio recording.

Sure, all this media excitement doesn't come free. High-end video-editing software can be expensive to license, and learning advanced media-production skills takes months or years. But your students aren't necessarily aspiring to be the next big Hollywood director. Virtually every laptop or desktop includes basic video-editing software already, and many "freeware" programs exist online, as well as intro-level versions of popular software. Further, your students probably already know how to shoot and edit basic video on their smartphones. They are digital natives, remember? With any luck, they'll be teaching you how to trim a video or edit down an audio recording.

And remember: You aren't grading them on the professional composition of their cinematography or audio-recording technique, nor their professional acting or voice-over talents. These aren't film majors, and they probably don't know who Jean-Luc Godard or Akira Kurosawa are. But your students did grow up watching thousands of hours of movies, television, and online video. They do have a sense for visual storytelling (even if they've never before applied their intuition). Rather, you are evaluating their content, the choices they make in presenting their scholarship using visual rhetoric, and their ability to extend their thoughts from the written and spoken word to a new medium.

Yes, it is going to be a bit of trial and error on everyone's part. It is no secret that interdisciplinary efforts in academe are frequently met with obstacles. Your challenges will be unique to your institution, but here are a few ideas to lay the groundwork for your first media-production assignment:

- You just might have to make friends with your institution's IT department to make sure that students have access to relevant technology.
- You might invite a cinema-studies or media-arts colleague to give a guest lecture before the assignment.
- You may discover that other faculty members share an interest in media-production assignments but just never got around to it. Band together and form allies.
- Consider having a media-savvy TA, graduate student, or work-study student show you the basics of iMovie, Photoshop, or Audacity. Perhaps give a similar tutorial to the class.
- Inquire what technology is available at the campus library—another potential hub for media-production support. If nothing is offered, request it for the future.
- Finally, do not forget the wealth of online resources, such as step-by-step tutorials; I can point students in the right direction with almost any aspect of media production by running a search on YouTube—for example, how to burn a DVD with iDVD, encode a video for web presentation using Premiere, or blend layers in Photoshop.

In the end, your semester final could feel less like an examination and more like a film festival—with students exchanging ideas long after the screen goes dark, talking about potential collaboration for a next project, and reminiscing about the obstacles they overcame to create their media assignments. When they go into a job interview describing how they took their research and created a compelling short documentary or audio essay, your former students just might thank you. After all, you have embraced their "digital nativism" and helped prepare them for an information economy that increasingly communicates through visual media.

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