

Documentary project: An experiment in cooperative learning

Simeon David Flowers

Tokai University

Abstract

Recently, an experimental course in documentary filmmaking was presented at the *2014 Paperless: Innovation & technology in education* conference held in Chiba, Japan. The course used cooperative learning theory to manage learning. Students in the course created mini documentaries about international students on campus, as part of an English elective. A summary of these proceedings and an example of one of the student projects is included in this article. Feedback from audience members attending the conference revealed interest in the management of student learning with regard to the technical aspects of the filmmaking process.

Introduction

As teachers, many of us have faced situations where class sizes are too large, resources are too minimal, or teaching time is too limited to carry out interesting ideas we may have. This instructor recently designed a course for Tokai University which used documentary filmmaking as a method for providing extensive contact with international students on campus. This one credit English elective ended up being highly popular, and 73 students registered for the course. Due to enrollment size, limited time and limited resources, the course adopted a cooperative learning approach to achieve its objectives.

Theory

Perhaps the most important benefit of cooperative learning is the increased connection students make with the learning material, and with each other as a social collective (Barkley, Cross & Major, 2005). This interdependence allows students to “teach” each other. Cooperative learning allows for the teacher to maintain control over the overall structure of learning while students are responsible for combining their resources to complete learning tasks.

Objectives

One of the major objectives of this course was that students gain confidence through experience. The project was designed such that completing earlier stages of the project would require contact with many different international students on campus. It was hoped that the amount of contact would provide significant experience to overcome the fears students typically have when making contact with the international community.

Another related, but perhaps more important objective, was that students gain a deeper understanding of their international peers through extensive contact. It has been argued that when it comes to experiential learning in intercultural situations “cultivating and understanding human relationships is more important than abstract knowledge” (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004, p. 26). With this in mind, it was decided that the documentaries should focus on one individual in depth, as this would provide opportunity to cultivate a meaningful relationship and develop a deeper understanding of the culture the students would be interacting with.

A final objective of this course was that students produce a documentary that would enable them to extend communication beyond their own campus. As such, students were encouraged to produce their documentary for the world-wide web.

Procedures

This course used a term-long documentary filmmaking project to guide the learning experience. The overall structure of the course was designed by the instructor; however, many of the technical details were managed by the students. For instance, students were encouraged to form their own project groups and elect roles within their groups. Each group was responsible for finding their own subject to interview. In addition, all of the logistic details regarding filming and editing were left to each individual group to manage.

In filming the documentary, many groups chose to use their smartphones. A 2010 article in *Media Shift* investigated the use of smartphones in professional journalism courses, noting that “[Smartphones] are light, unobtrusive and non-threatening for folks not used to media attention” (MacPhail, 2010). With this in mind, it seems that many students who chose this technology simply because they were most familiar with it, may have also selected the best tool for making documentaries.

Another major technological task, video editing, was also left to the project groups to negotiate.

Some groups chose to film with a camcorder and edit on a desktop computer, some chose to shoot and edit entirely on their smartphones; in many cases, the technical quality of the smartphone recordings was superior to those made by camcorder and edited on the desktop computer. Though each of the group's final projects differed greatly in content and quality, each group was able to complete their project on time. As a medium for extended communication with the international community, a selection of student work was uploaded to YouTube.

Assessment

Students were assessed using a combination of group score for their project, and individual score for participation. As part of the process students were given on-line surveys to assess themselves and their group members. Peer evaluations were taken into consideration by the instructor. As an example, one student received a negative evaluation by many of their group members. Their final grade suffered accordingly.

Evaluation

Sixty-one students responded to a post course evaluation given through an on-line medium. Students were asked to report on challenges they faced and changes in confidence they experienced as a result of the course. Qualitative analysis of student commentary revealed that most students felt language itself was the biggest obstacle for them to overcome with group member cooperation being the second most significant challenge. Results of a Likert scale suggested that net gains in confidence with regard to approaching non-Japanese peers for conversation were achieved as

a direct result of this course.

Discussion

One question which came up at the conference involved students' use of technology. Teachers wanted to know exactly what technology students had used to create their documentaries. The truth is, this instructor has limited knowledge of that aspect. Students were required to make those decisions within their project groups. There were a few reasons for this. The first reason is very practical as this instructor simply did not have the time or resources to provide the tools or instruction. The second reason is one of lack of need in that most students are already familiar with how to shoot video and many already know how to edit video as well. The third reason involves a deeper educational philosophy regarding learner autonomy and technology. Especially with regard to our rapidly changing technological landscape, this instructor believes it is more important that our students develop personal strategies for coping with technological challenges than that they "get it right".

The example work displayed here was created using an iPhone and edited on an iMac, using iMovie. The student said that it was her first time to use the iMovie software. The technical quality of this work supports the theory of cooperative learning used for this course, suggesting that we may not need to actively teach technology to motivated students at the tertiary level. In addition to technical quality, the narrative quality of this work surpassed instructor expectations.



[<Link to Video>](#)

Conclusions

The results of this course show that cooperative learning can be used for English study in the Japanese tertiary setting. The major course objective of developing confidence in intercultural communication was achieved through the cooperative approach. The willingness of some of the students to tackle more difficult intercultural communication genres, such as religion, may have been inimitable; however, this instructor was excited to see such challenges faced, and feels results like this open up the door for further research into amateur documentary filmmaking and how it can be used to develop intercultural awareness in the Japanese tertiary setting.

References

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Bio:

A fifteen year veteran of English teaching, Simeon likes to keep things fresh while also serving a pedagogical purpose. He enjoys teaching beyond the language and providing authentic experience through creative adaptation of technology.

<simeon.d.flowers@gmail.com> <CastleCLP.org>



Using Dragon Dictation VR software for more objective pronunciation feedback and guided self-correction for EFL students

James Henry III

Research Institute of English Language Education / Kobe Shukugawa Gakuin University

Abstract

This talk demonstrates a practical application for Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) software in the EFL classroom, as a tool to facilitate customized pronunciation feedback and correction. The hardware used was the Apple iPad, and the software is Nuance's Dragon Dictation. As this software is designed for practical speech-to-text applications in the target language, it is ideal both as a gauge for speech accuracy as well as a feedback mechanism to aid pronunciation improvement. Using this software in conjunction with instructor feedback is seen as potentially a more effective alternative to the typical subjective feedback from the instructor (by itself), whether modelling/chorusing, using diagrams about mouth-shaping and tongue positions or other common approaches. This paper will discuss how this approach was used for these purposes with Japanese 1st and 2nd-year University students, promising ways to build on this approach, as well as limitations encountered and expected. Also taken into discussion will be similar research with ASR software applications for customized pronunciation feedback for EFL students.

In today's world, we have increasingly innovative ways to interact with technologies for solving problems. Voice controlled software is becoming more prevalent as a means to achieve hands-free control of devices and systems. Speed and convenience are the oft-cited benefits received by