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Cultivating Critical Consciousness Through Digital Video Inquiry

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# ABSTRACT

As political participation across the globe grows increasingly contentious and accusations of “fake news” and “post-truth” politics rise, the *how, where*, and *why* of civic learning in schools are called into question. In contrast, multimodal practices such as digital video production continue to promote youth engagement and deliberation of social issues through dialogue, crowd-sourcing, and relationships. Herein we examine the classroom-based approaches to digital video inquiry as a problem-posing antidote to traditional banking approaches to civic education. To forward this claim, we describe 2 classroom uses of digital video production for critical social inquiry. In both cases, digital video inquiry invited students to move beyond banked knowledge about issues into a critical relationship with their topics of study and the communities affected — becoming a path of political participation not easily allowed in other pedagogical and social spaces.

# Introduction

As political participation across the globe grows increasingly contentious and accusations of "fake news" and "post-truth" politics rise, the how, where, and why of civic learning in schools are called into question. In contrast, multimodal practices such as digital video production continue to promote youth engagement and deliberation of social issues through dialogue, crowd-sourcing, and relationships. Herein we examine the classroom-based approaches to digital video inquiry as a problem-posing antidote to traditional banking approaches to civic education. To forward this claim, we describe 2 classroom uses of digital video production for critical social inquiry. In both cases, digital video inquiry invited students to move beyond banked knowledge about issues into a critical relationship with their topics of study and the communities affected — becoming a path of political participation not easily allowed in other pedagogical and social spaces.

I think taking this class is the best choice I've made this year because of the way that we look at what is going on around us, the way we look at all of the experiences that are happening to us is so reflective and so philosophical. It helps us to get to know each other and get to know ourselves ... I think that it is really important to understand what you have going on yourself, before you can contribute to the rest of the world

- Chandra

According to Chandra, a high school senior in the US, a class devoted to the production of documentaries about social issues was one of her most meaningful classes. Through producing media about the world around her, she was invited to experience and assess her place in the world and to inquire within how she could best "contribute to the rest of the world."

On the other side of the globe, Sergio also considers his place in the world. A graduate of an elite private school in Latin America, Sergio reflected on the lessons learned from an economics documentary he filmed in one of his multidisciplinary courses:

Before my only purpose was to make a lot of money. But now I know that I can't let money define what I do. I want to give something back to the community. Not necessarily volunteering or donating money, but finding a way to do something to our society so that it's not only beneficial for me but ... for all the people, too.

In both cases, we see young adults investigating their place in the world, harnessing the multimedia potentials of digital video composition to build understanding and to consider how they might contribute to the world. These civic-minded musings of global youth are especially important given the current state of democracy, which many see as tenuous, "a fragile experiment that must be defended if it is to endure" (Serwer, [22]). By democracy, we mean more than systems of self-government. Instead, we understand democracy as a state of being, a way of making sense of the world, and an ethos committed to the equal dignity and humanity of all (West, [27]). While systems of self-government are an expression of this ethos, democracy is more robustly understood as a web of relationships within an imagined community (Anderson, [ 1]), where those relationships structure a "circle of we" (Berlant, [ 3]) oriented toward an idea of the common good (Etzioni, [ 7]). Democracy is "always-in-the-making" (Thayer-Bacon, [25]), not the least because global capitalism and white supremacy have prevented its full expression (Mills, [15]).

Historically, civic education and democratic dialogue have been a foundational defense for democracies (Dewey, [ 4]/2009; Parker, [20]), but in light of increasing political polarization and anti-democratic forces, many question the adequacy of these practices (Gibson, [10]; Kahlenberg & Janey, [12]; Mirra et al., this issue). Instead, we suggest that educators reconsider the role of media in the classroom as a means of cultivating a critical democratic consciousness. Digital video production, specifically, affords a process of deep dive inquiry that has the potential to transform students' political consciousness. However, it is not often considered a foundational pedagogy in civic or democratic education. Our work suggests it should be (Doerr-Stevens, [ 6]; Doerr-Stevens & Gibson, [ 5]). In what follows, we argue that digital video production has the potential to be a transformative, consciousness-raising pedagogy. We draw on examples from two settings: ( 1) an urban public school in the US where English teachers used documentaries to teach disciplinary standards and ( 2) an elite private school in South America where teachers used documentary filmmaking to engage students in economic thinking. Through these examples, we demonstrate how digital video inquiry can be harnessed as a problem-posing pedagogy to transform students' sociopolitical consciousness toward empathy, solidarity, and justice.

# Critically reading the world through digital video inquiry

Problem-posing pedagogies (Freire, [ 8]) invite students to read both the world and the word, and they stand in contrast to the typical "banking" approach to education, where teachers "deposit" information into students. Banking denies students the opportunity to question, perceive, and think—to be human. In contrast, problem-posing pedagogies invite students to make their own sense of the world. They invite students into acts of cognition, understanding that learning and social transformation require thinking beings in dialogue with one another. In problem-posing pedagogy, critical knowing and civic doing are intertwined as justice-oriented praxis.

In classrooms, problem-posing pedagogies can look like students documenting social conditions (Stovall et al., [23]), interrogating their identities (Romero et al., [21]), entering into participatory action research (Mirra et al., [16]), or interrupting dominant curricula (Swalwell, [24]). In all of these applications, problem-posing is a democratic process of cultivating students' sociopolitical consciousness. When the teacher-as-expert stops depositing information and instead encourages students to interrogate their worlds—when students are granted intellectual self-determination—critical consciousness can flourish.

Critical literacies, rooted in problem-posing, teach *how* to critically read (con)texts. *Critical* reading means that, rather than passively receiving singular interpretations, readers question power, representation, bias, and privilege as reproduced and resisted across (con)texts (Vasquez et al., [26]). Critical *digital* literacy extends questions of power to digital texts and online contexts, calling for critical reading and the production and circulation of texts that interrogate and disrupt dominant representations (Ávila & Zacher Pandya, [ 2]; Kellner & Share, [14]). In classrooms, critical digital literacies might ask viewers to consider who is telling a story and which viewpoints are privileged. It might also take the form of digital video production in which students create public service announcements and then circulate them online using strategic hashtags (Wargo & Clayton, 2018), or "critical digital invention" wherein students reinvent patterns of participation within a given online platform, creating altogether new practices and publics for classroom dialogue (Mirra et al., [18]).

The potential of digital texts and media participation to invite youth engagement in politics has been described as "participatory politics" (Cristol & Choi, this issue; Kahne et al., [13]) and "critical civic learning" (Mirra & Garcia, [17]). Ngo et al. ([19]) in particular suggest that the creative practices of the arts and digital media production within youth-oriented communities uniquely promote a critical, sociopolitical consciousness comprising three dimensions: identification, mobilization, and cosmopolitanism. Youth media production opens spaces to *identify* and name aspects of the world; youth might then *mobilize* self and others through creative production and circulation of counternarratives; they are then able to claim a stance of *cosmopolitanism*, in which creators are able to move across positions of insider and outsider. In classrooms, opportunities for sociopolitical, civic learning might come through media production, youth participatory action research, or collaborative art-making and performance.

Digital video inquiry affords a space to develop these critical civic competencies through an authentic and applied process of problem-posing (Goodman, [11]). As we show below, four different parts of the filmmaking process serve as invitations to the student-as-filmmaker to read the word and the world critically. While filmmaking does not necessarily require the pursuit of social action, the development of critical consciousness that it nourishes is a necessary prerequisite for mobilization. Before showing how that occurs, we briefly describe the contexts where we examined digital video inquiry.

# School contexts

## Colegio Americano

Colegio Americano is a private, dual-language (Spanish/English) school in a major South American city. Roughly 1700 students enroll in grades K3-12, with 25% of the student body coming from the US, 25% from other countries, and 50% national citizens. The majority of students come from wealthy families that can afford to pay the $16,000US annual tuition and $18,500US entrance fee. The Innovation Academy (IA) is an optional, interdisciplinary program for upper school students. Students forego IB humanities courses to instead engage in project-based learning toward social responsibility. A central project in eleventh grade IA is the economics documentary, in which students take a deep dive into an economics question of their own choosing that affects their local community in some way. (For more on Colegio Americano, see Doerr-Stevens & Gibson, [ 5]).

## Crosstown High School

Crosstown High School is a public school situated in a Midwestern city of the US that serves around 2200 students. Drawing on students from across the city, the school is respected for its IB program and claims a cosmopolitan identity, echoed in its motto: "Many Traditions: One School." While the school is viewed as one of the best public schools in the city, it is also highly segregated. One of the English Language Arts classes at Crosstown has juniors and seniors studying disciplinary standards of nonfiction reading and writing through the production of radio and film documentaries. During the school year, students analyzed radio and film documentaries and participated in sound and video production projects. (For more on Crosstown, see Doerr-Stevens, [ 6].)

In both of the school contexts, students were invited to investigate topics of their own choosing. At Colegio Americano students were asked to research topics of economic importance to their community, while at Crosstown students were asked to explore notions of insider and outsider cultural status through studying a subculture within their community. Table 1 below shares a sampling of the documentary videos produced by students in each of the contexts. (See Table 1).

Table 1. Digital video investigations *Title* and (Topic of inquiry)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Crosstown Senior High | Colegio Americano |
| Invited to investigate a subculture | Invited to investigate an economic concept |
| City Pulse (public transportation) | The Real Cost of Fast Fashion (externalizing costs) |
| Do Parents Matter? (single parents) | Behind Quinoa (global trade) |
| LAX Lacrosse (women's Lacrosse team) | Fujishock (macroeconomic policy) |
| The Modern Family (nuclear family structures) | Industry of Silence (incentives) |
| The Golden Thyme (community coffee shop) | Beyond the Boulevard (gentrification) |
| Asian Teen Relationships (teens relationships) | Why Do I Care? (economic interdependence) |

# Moments of problem-posing in filmmaking

Across settings, digital video inquiry opened up space for students to interrogate social structures and to drive their own coming-to-know process, a prerequisite for acting toward democracy and justice in their social context. Specifically, four moments of the filmmaking process were catalysts for students' bourgeoning consciousness: formulating a question, experiencing the subject, selecting media elements, and crafting a narrative. The understandings that unfolded in these moments demonstrate students reconsidering the complex social systems that shape their contexts.

## Formulating a question

Students in Colegio Americano's IA were encouraged to approach their economics documentaries like a "Socratic gadfly," meaning that they should ask hard questions about their topic. While students chose topics based on personal interest, their teacher Mr. Bill pushed them to "dig deeper" than easy storylines, and he used economic concepts to model this. For Sergio of the opening vignette, this pedagogical prodding led him to see his topic anew. Sergio was investigating quota laws in the fishing industry ("Why Do I Care?"), in which his father was a global executive. Because of Mr. Bill's urging to ask hard economic questions, Sergio was pushed to consider his topic through lenses such as economic interdependence. Ultimately, Sergio asked in his documentary, "How does the growth of the commercial fishing industry affect local, artisanal fishermen?" The question led him to realize the negative impact of his father's corporation on small fisheries, which in turn changed how he viewed his own eventual role in his father's corporation. How Sergio formulated his question shaped his inquiry, which in turn shaped what he discovered, a common finding in critical democratic education (Gibson, [ 9]). These discoveries helped Sergio see social inequalities that were otherwise invisible to him, which then led him to consider his complicity in these systems.

The video inquiry project at Crosstown asked students to investigate a subculture in their local community. After identifying their subculture of focus, students were prompted by teachers to ask, who are the insiders and outsiders of this subculture? What forms the boundaries of this culture? One group investigated parenting ("Do Parents Matter?"). Frustrated by their own "overprotective parents," they began their project with an inquiry into the values of demanding parents, initially positioning themselves as outsiders to the parental subculture. However, after interviewing parents from different family structures (widowed, legal guardians, married, divorced), they became aware of the different constraints parents experience and felt instead the need to defend parents. Inspired by their first few interviews, the group shifted their inquiry to explore the

challenges and successes of single parenting. This more nuanced inquiry led the students to further interrogate their own understandings of single parenthood as well as the many racial and economic stereotypes related to single parents. The teacher-provided questions prodded students' to interrogate the world critically, which in turn repositioned the youth in relation to their topic.

Similar to the *cosmopolitanism* dimension of sociopolitical consciousness presented by Ngo et al. ([19]), the process of video inquiry allowed the students to reframe their questions and process of inquiry in ways that placed themselves inside the issues of study. No longer positioned as outsiders, the students gained a deeper empathy for those involved in the subculture or economic issue, in turn allowing them to better mobilize themselves and others through creative production and circulation of counternarratives.

## Immersively experiencing the world

At Crosstown, students investigated their chosen subculture through field observations and interviews. As part of the field observations for her project on public transportation ("City Pulse"), Clarissa rode the city bus for the first time without her parents. In a post-production interview, Clarissa shared with Candance that "actually being on the bus"—the involvement in the world that she was investigating—had the most impact and "shaping of attitudes" on her views about the bus. For instance, Clarissa shared a moment during her bus ride where she sat especially close to two Spanish-speaking families. She watched as the mothers talked and the children shared a bag of chips, even offering nearby Clarissa a chip. She described this moment as briefly feeling "part of the family," going on to reflect that the social barriers she otherwise felt on the bus were most likely "self-imposed."

While Clarissa eschewed deeper analysis of the city bus system when asked about the impacts of race and gender, she did express a shift in understanding that moved away from stereotypes to experiencing the bus as an "escape from the social identity markers of life." Clarissa described gaining a fuller appreciation for the individual experiences that others live as well as the unique stories each has to offer. While these more articulated aspects of her bus-riding experiences did not make it into the documentary, Clarissa felt that her changed perspective did: rather than focusing on stereotypes of bus riders, as originally planned, her group chose to represent the bus as a "space for stories."

Similarly, Dani and Renata's immersive experience in the behind-the-scenes world of fast fashion for their IA economics documentary changed how they viewed the industry ("The Real Cost of Fast Fashion"). Their city was a major global exporter for cheaply made clothing for international chains, and they visited these garment factories while filming to better understand the costs and benefits of fast fashion. After their first visit, Dani described what they had seen: "The workers have to produce *thousands* of shirts in an hour. It's so fast, they can't even knit well, which explains why the clothes always fall apart so fast! And one of the workers showed me their hands—they were *burned* by the dyes and fabrics. These are *horrible* factories." While this may not be new global information, it was new information for the girls, and experiencing this reality changed how they talked about fast fashion. By applying and then experiencing economic concepts (e.g., externalized costs), they saw the fashion industry with new eyes: while fast fashion "democratized style" for the middle class, as Dani described it, it also required workers to bear the cost of rising middle-class consumerism through poor working conditions and low wages.

In both cases, immersion within the topic of study invited a critical reading of the world. Students' experiences of their topics launched a flurry of questions and curiosities that commenced a process of identification (Ngo et al., [19]), or naming of hidden forces—social, historical, and political—that shape the world. While none of the students fully articulated the forces of inequality—such as race and class—they were able to name the presence of social forces and recognize their own complicity in reinforcing those structures.

## Selecting media elements

For some students, it was the critical consideration of media elements that prompted problem posing. This was the case for Erin, an African American eleventh-grader at Crosstown, also working in the "City Pulse" group. For Erin, her vision for the documentary was never about the stereotypes of bus riders. Growing up with a father who was a 20-year bus system employee, her understanding of bus riders was more complicated, attuned to the various social forces that shape who, how, and when people ride the bus.

Erin's group was not allowed to record video on the bus; they therefore turned to YouTube for footage. This process unearthed videos of bus riders entitled "Angry Black Man" and "Homeless Man," stereotypical representations that created a dissonance for Erin that she described as "stopping at easy answers." While Erin never directly stated that she did not want to use these videos in the film, she did critically probe her group members' intentions, at one point saying that the "Angry Black Man" video was "just wrong."

When asked during a post-production video which part of the film she thought most conveyed her focus, she pointed to the section that featured a voice-over asking questions such as, "Why do people have such amazing experiences on the bus? Why is it such a welcoming, open, and unconventional space?" This voice-over was layered atop footage from the cartoon *The Magic School Bus* and followed by a clip of interview footage with the Director of Diversity and Equal Opportunity at the City Transit office. In this interview, the Director described how a frequent passenger had been absent from the bus for a while and that, upon return, was presented with a card to welcome him back. For Erin this scene described the unique culture and community of the bus, but she lamented that this multidimensional representation was never fully realized in the film. The IA's Simón was concerned with how the soundtrack he selected shaped his story about the local music industry ("Industry of Silence"). While his topic was not inherently critical or democratic, the process of selecting background music for his film pushed Simón to think critically about the veracity of his argument and the reception of his ideas among the music community. Should he include music by the obscure bands popular among his elite peers? Or should he include the cumbia music that was popular throughout the country but that he and his classmates made fun of? He initially ignored cumbia, but after interviewing industry leaders, Simón grew sheepish about this, worrying that if he ignored the country's most popular genre, viewers outside his community would see his analysis as "flawed," "over generalized," or "not knowing reality." In other words, through music selection, Simón saw that his perspective was not the only perspective on the local music industry.

For both Erin and Simón, the selection of media elements required them to "critically consider" their relationships to the ideas and perspectives being represented (Ngo et al., [19]). In advocating for which videos and music to include and which to omit, they discerned their stances as one of many while also prodding at some of the hidden and racialized forces that shaped their understandings.

## Crafting a storyline

For some student filmmakers, consciousness raising happened during moments of crafting the narrative, wherein film elements are edited to create scenes and transitions in service of that narrative. These small editing decisions have large impacts on how topics and subjects are represented.

For Chandra, another member of the *City Pulse* documentary group, the most meaningful part of the documentary-making process was editing. During editing, Chandra focused on the technical aspects of composition, noting areas in which she constructed scenes through parallel editing of interview footage and added music and visual effects to create a cinematic feel of "magic."

Although Chandra's group initially wanted to name and dispel stereotypes of bus riders, access to media and technical know-how made this difficult. Instead, Chandra chose to reposition herself and her group members through her editing as subjects in the documentary, prospective riders investigating the city bus. Chandra stated that this shift "shows we were affected" and "brings us [the student filmmakers] in ... Rather than just being an observational point of view, it's an involved point of view." In positioning herself and her group members as part of the city bus while also complicit in superficial understandings of it, Chandra uses the editing process to invite viewers to also consider their subjecthood in regards to the city bus system.

In their documentary about quinoa ("Behind Quinoa"), the IA's Aleyda and Ana Pau wanted viewers to understand how growing global demand for quinoa was harming small farmers. In order to distill a complex economic story into a 7-minute video, Aleyda and Ana Pau positioned a farmer and the Andean highlands as the main characters of their documentary. Although they included interviews with industry leaders and economic ministers, their film prioritized original cinematography of the Lake Titicaca highlands and a single interview with Cesario, a quinoa farmer. In so doing, they conveyed a sense of wonder for quinoa's natural environment, a sense of empathy for the original Andean farmers of quinoa, and a sense of outrage for what would be lost without government intervention.

Even though their peers frequently stated that the "real" Latin America existed in the cities and were quick to distance themselves from the indigenous communities of the highlands, Ana Pau and Aleyda wanted to persuade viewers on a policy position—that governments needed to intervene in some way in the quinoa market. When they discussed the editing process with classmates, they were confident in their choice to prioritize Cesario's voice: "We are picking a side. What makes a documentary stronger is *not* supporting the viewpoints of both sides." They conveyed this not only through their explicit economic analysis but also through the footage selected, including the final scene of Cesario sitting on a rock wall with his farm behind him, looking straight at the camera and saying, "We should have more support from the government ... because we are practically abandoned."

As directors, the students crafted the subjects of their documentaries, the conflicts their subjects would encounter, and the last words they would speak. Their storycrafting became an attempt to foreground perspectives and mobilize (Ngo et al., [19]) viewers on behalf of the issues they centered in their documentaries.

# The possibilities of democratic praxis in digital video inquiry

Through the questions they ask, the experiences they have, the media they select, and the stories they tell, student filmmakers can come to understand the world they *think* they know from new perspectives. This embodied inquiry process invites empathy with film subjects, awareness of divergent experiences, and sense-making out of dissonant realities. Translating this inquiry into a coherent video narrative can, in turn, lead to shifts in personal disposition toward the topic. In our examples, student filmmakers demonstrate a burgeoning sociopolitical consciousness, wherein they learned to see and name social structures and to identify multiple perspectives and lived realities. These narrative and epistemological moves align with the foundational stances and competencies of critical democratic pedagogies (Mirra & Garcia, [17]; Ngo et al., [19]).

We would be naïve, however, to assert that this alone represents a radical democratic shift. In-class filmmaking is not the same thing as social action, political mobilization, or radical solidarity. We don't know if, longitudinally, digital video inquiry transformed students' democratic praxis, nor have we delved into the ways that race, class, language, and social status obviously shape this meaning-making process. We also must acknowledge that not every student experienced a sociopolitical awakening. In both settings, we have stories of students who stubbornly resisted. For example, in the IA's "Fujishock" documentary, a student focused only on how a controversial economic policy from the 1990s promoted GDP growth. Even when prodded to consider other perspectives—including the fact that "poor people suffered a lot," as the student acknowledged — the student chose to present a singular storyline, interviewing only subjects who confirmed his positive analysis of the policy. Resistance was also noted in the "LAX Girls Lacrosse" documentary at Crosstown, where students chose to include music selections that were objectifying women despite the documentary's attempts to exult an often overlooked female sport. When asked why they selected this particular song, the students stated that they could see the contradictions but wanted the documentary to be "cool." Students can and do choose to step away from democratic prodding to instead protect storylines that confirm existing worldviews and to forward stories that might be better received by audience members.

Resistance is not unique to digital video inquiry. In our own work, teachers share stories of student resistance in many forms—resistance to banked critical content, resistance to perceived political indoctrination, resistance to outsized intellectual demands, and resistance to teachers "not knowing what they're talking about" when investigating marginalized communities. While we witnessed student resistance, we also saw that digital video inquiry uniquely addressed many of these other forms of resistance that teachers face.

Digital video production is, at its heart, a process of intellectual self-determination: students ask the questions, students film footage, students edit, students construct narratives. Digital video production turns democratic **theory into practice** by inviting students to share epistemological power with the teacher and by encouraging students to embody a democratic disposition (West, [27]). As demonstrated here, students learn to "read the word and the world" critically through authentic exploration of multiple perspectives and narratives. Such "deep dives" through video inquiry have the potential to cultivate students' sense of empathy for other perspectives, their sense of agency as civic actors, and perhaps most importantly, their sense of connection to deep explorations of complex social topics that can help move them beyond anger and polarization to creative resistance and agency.

# Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

# Additional Resources

**1. Lambert, J. & Hessler, B. (2018) Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community. 5th Ed. Routledge.**

This book provides a practical guide for creating community through story-based video production. The book provides both a seven step process for creating digital stories through voice-over, images, and music as well as examples of community-based digital storytelling from across the globe. The emphasis on story asks video makers to critically consider their place in the stories they tell and share.

**2. Doerr-Stevens, C. (2017). Embracing the messiness of research: Documentary Video Composition as Embodied, Critical Media Literacy. *English Journal, 106*(3), 56-62.**

In this article I expand further on the process of embodied inquiry. I describe how documentary video composition can be a form of embodied research as seen in the composing process of one group of high school students who research public transportation, paying special attention to embodied learning via field-based research and multimodality.

**3. Gibson, M. L. (2018). Scaffolding critical questions: Learning to read the world in a middle school civics class in Mexico. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 62*(1), 25–34. https://0-doi-org.libus.csd.mu.edu/10.1002/jaal.735**

In this practitioner-oriented article, I trace a pedagogical process for teaching students to ask critical questions. Specifically, I share instructional frameworks for modeling how to read the word and the world critically. This article also focuses on how this process can play out in privileged settings as teachers strive to cultivate a critical consciousness among those who benefit from inequality.

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