

# Far Beyond Show and Tell: Strategies for Integration of Desktop Documentary Making into History Classrooms

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“Images embodied in film are more powerful yet. One mode of liberation from this power might be to encourage students of history to take control and to make their own films as a way of understanding the past.”

—Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (New York: Reaktion, 2001), 167-168.

Elementary and secondary school history students demonstrate a great deal of enthusiasm for making documentary films.<sup>1</sup> With free and easy-to-use software, as well as vast online, archival resources containing images and sounds, students can sit at a computer and make serious and engaging documentary productions. Students’ emotional engagement with pictures and music dissolves the question: Why are we studying this? With students affectively engaged by technology, imagery, and sound, teachers “can leverage the power of graphics, music and cinema to support richer historical inquiry and interpretation.”<sup>2</sup> Teachers, moreover, can use desktop documentary making to help students efficiently understand history as a construction; documentaries combine images, sounds and special effects into a narrative representation of the past.

In a university and high school partnership, we are studying ways to productively integrate desktop documentary making into high school history courses. While little research has appeared on how, why, or with what

results secondary school history teachers have integrated documentary making into classrooms, we know colleagues nationwide are doing it. Our Internet research indicated teachers have developed a variety of ways to help students produce high quality documentaries. At Lee Summit High School in Kansas, for example, students and teachers go to the school website (<http://its.leesummit.k12.mo.us/digitalmedia.htm>) to print out a “storyboard,” with which students organize images and narrative scripts to build a documentary. We also discovered many desktop documentaries, created by students for school history assignments, on the video sharing website, YouTube ([www.youtube.com/](http://www.youtube.com/)).

What is a historical desktop documentary? How do students make them? Why should teachers have students make documentaries? How can their production be successfully integrated into secondary school classrooms?

These are questions raised from exploring potentialities and challenges of desktop documentary making in our own classes. In this article, we share answers to these questions for those who have

integrated desktop documentary making into history classrooms or those who have interest in doing so.

## What is Desktop Documentary?

Desktop documentaries are motion pictures students create at a computer keyboard through organizing images, sounds, music, video clips and special effects into a movie of three to ten minutes duration. To organize images and sound, we recommend students use Microsoft Photo Story 3 or Apple iMovie. These programs contain three or four simple, easy-to-learn movie making operations that can produce a sophisticated digital movie of a past event or development.

Photo Story 3 is available as a free download from Microsoft ([www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/digitalphotography/photostory/default.mspx](http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/digitalphotography/photostory/default.mspx)). Originally designed for Windows XP, the software is compatible with the new Windows Vista operating system.

For non-PC users, iMovie is an excellent alternative to Photo Story 3. This video editing software from Apple comes pre-installed on all Macs. iMovies enables users to integrate video clips into documentary productions whereas Photo Story 3 does not have this capacity.

## How Does a Student Make a Desktop Documentary?

In conjunction with the descriptions below, we urge readers to view docu-

mentaries that former students at our high school uploaded to YouTube and have given us permission to reference in this article.

Zach Wahls' Nazi Propaganda documentary ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=djvSuPfTomg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djvSuPfTomg)), for example, focused on parallels he saw between police state behaviors in the 1930s and contemporary political developments.

To make his desktop documentary, Zach first decided to use Photo Story 3. With this choice of software, he had to construct his documentary exclusively using images, sound, and panning, fading or other "special effects." (Having selected Photo Story 3, he did not have the option of integrating video clips into his production.) Zach then went online to find images and music that could serve in the construction of his motion picture. He downloaded many images and sounds into his computer. Subsequently, he selected and imported the images into the Photo Story 3 storyboard.

Zach then proceeded to arrange the images in a meaningful way. He returned to online archives as his story took shape and recognized the need for additional sources to construct his representation of the history of Nazi propaganda. Some of the images with which Zach "experimented" using the storyboard ended up "on the cutting room floor." Zach also used the software's panning, fading, and transition effects to focus viewers' attention on a particular detail in a slide. He aligned music with images to influence viewers' emotional responses to the story unfolding before them.

While Zach enacted just a few easy-to-learn operations, he engaged in a complicated process of history making. These historical practices, which we next discuss, provide quite compelling reasons for the integration of desktop documentary making into history courses.

### **Why Have Students Make Desktop Documentaries?**

With scaffolding from teachers, we argue desktop documentary making can better position students to comprehend history

as a construction shaped through historians' or documentarians' historical practices. These practices include selection of sources, analysis and interpretation of sources, and the complex, dynamic process of "fitting together" a story about the past.<sup>3</sup> Like historians writing the past, students make decisions as they search online for images, film clips, voices, music, or sound recordings. As they locate documents, students analyze and interpret them to discern how the image or sound conveys their emerging visions of the past.

Again in a manner akin to academic historians, documentary makers continually arrange and re-arrange audio and visual evidence into a variety of possible combinations to best tell the story. They reject some images and retain others. This constant research and maneuvering of evidence, although challenging, has salutary consequences for history students using digital storytelling software. As historian Cecilia O'Leary observed of her university history students, "[t]he very act of going back over the evidence ... involves them in the pattern of recursive iterations that 'separates good historians from not very good historians.'"<sup>4</sup> O'Leary, together with historians Michael Coventry, Peter Felten, David Jaffee, and Tracey Weis, discussed how documentary making required post-secondary students to exercise skills of the historian's craft, while providing "innovative opportunities for expression of historical understanding."<sup>5</sup> They discovered desktop documentaries pushed students to develop "visual arguments," as they applied historians' skills to images and sound. They found, moreover, visual histories supported instructional goals for writing history, while enabling students to appreciate the unique history-making properties of historical documentaries. As was the case with writing historical narratives, the professors observed that visual essay production helped students understand, for example, that every primary source has been created with purpose and intention and must be viewed skeptically. By producing docu-

mentaries students shaped and disrupted earlier understandings of past events and developments. Through experimenting with image and sound combinations they deepened comprehension of history as a construction.<sup>6</sup>

Based on our experiences with desktop documentary making, we believe it helped our students meet standards articulated in the National History Standards, as well as the National Council for Social Studies Standards.<sup>7</sup> To experience authentic history, Standards documents insist, students must engage in historical inquiry, namely, the collection, analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of historical documents. These practices refine students' understanding of bias and intent inherent in any historical document. Synthesis of documents into narratives represents a central component of historical thinking. "Such narratives and arguments," the National History Standards observed, "may take many forms—essays, debates, and editorials, for instance."<sup>8</sup> Among these narrative forms we should now include desktop documentaries.

If we recognize desktop documentary making has potential for enhancing history teaching and learning, then we must acknowledge challenges to its integration into classrooms. Desktop documentary making takes time and effort, but we need to begin thinking about how we can meet the practical challenges while mining the energy and enthusiasm it most certainly creates among students.

### **How Can Desktop Documentary Making be Successfully Integrated into Secondary School Classrooms?**

While thinking about practical issues associated with desktop documentary making, it is important to note that documentary production works comfortably and powerfully with teachers' regular integration of primary sources into their history instruction. Teachers who ask students to make movies can use the assignments as vehicles for having them carefully analyze and interpret aural and

visual artifacts: songs, speeches, photographs, posters, or political cartoons.

In the process of introducing documentary making, teachers also can discuss with students the special qualities of history generated through combinations of images and sounds. They can, for example, show students what the legendary film director Sergei Eisenstein termed the art of “juxtaposition.”<sup>9</sup> Juxtaposition, as Figure 1 demonstrates, draws upon the simple but powerful recognition that the same image paired with different images creates very different meanings.

Besides showing students juxtaposition, teachers should view with students contributions to video sharing sites. As mentioned above, there are many student produced documentaries on YouTube. We recommend, for example, “Japanese Internment: This Is the Enemy” ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkaQzUMGE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkaQzUMGE)). In viewing this documentary, students can see how the movie maker repeatedly used juxtaposition and combined images, as well as voice and music, to create a short but powerful historical representation of the United States internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

While exploring with students documentary making strategies of students whose work appears on YouTube, his-

**Figure 1.** Example of Juxtaposition



**American Memory Gallery of Japanese Internment** (Japanese child photograph)  
<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/99/fear/gallery.html>

**Naval History and Heritage** (Pearl Harbor photograph)  
<http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/images/g470000/g474789.jpg>

**National Japanese American Historical Society** (propaganda poster)  
<http://bss.sfsu.edu/internment/postermurder.html>

## WEBSITE RESOURCES

We are developing a website where students and other teacher can locate resources we use in conjunction with desktop documentary assignments: <http://sites.google.com/site/mjohnsonicw/dd-resources>. Three of the documents are described below.

**Desktop Documentary Assignment:** The website includes the “Historical Documentary Design Project” assignment. This document announces to students that “Here is your chance to become Ken Burns!” It explains what desktop documentary making involves and discusses how to produce good ones. Suggested topics are listed. The document also explains that class time will be made available, and where students can look for online artifacts. Included also are the due date and instructions for how students are to electronically submit their documentaries to the teacher for evaluation.

**Evaluation:** The “Documentary Design Project Evaluation Form” (a rubric) lays out for students grading criteria applied to their documentaries. The criteria include: staying within the allotted time frame (5 minutes); variety of source types such as quotes, pictures, maps, headlines or other artifacts; creativity; attribution of sources; concern for audience learning, and an authorship statement.

**Authorship Statement:** As part of the desktop documentary project we require students to prepare a statement in which they articulate how and why they made production decisions leading to their final cut. In the statement we want students to explain how and why they juxtaposed images or sequenced several of them. We also require students to explain how they intended music to work in their documentaries, for example, to provoke emotions in viewers. The Authorship Statement also instructs students to “discuss how [his or her] documentary . . . intended to deepen the viewers’ understanding of the topic it explores.” We have found the Authorship Statement helps insure students understand how to produce a competent documentary. For the instructor, it provides additional data on student performance for feedback: e.g., “You successfully clustered images to help viewers understand people’s resistance to Soviet collectivization.” We peruse each “Authorship Statement” while viewing a student’s production during the film festival. The statement helps us efficiently grade the compositions, as they are shown, using the “Evaluation” rubric described above.

tory teachers can productively meet challenges of integrating desktop documentary production into their courses.

One strategy is to have a set-aside unit during which students (individually or in pairs) develop their own documentaries at the same time. Teachers using this approach can offer students some class time and some homework time. One of us has students each year show their productions as a “film festival” spread out over about a week, during which the teacher intersperses instruction with viewing of several projects per class period. This approach allows each student to take ownership of a specific topic or subtopic that has been previously studied and tell his or her own story about it. With choice over their topics, and the story they elect to tell, students invest more personal energy and inscribe their own historical and artistic “voices” into their productions.

This strategy can be effectively integrated into a unit whose topics enable students to find rich veins of online artifacts to support the creation of their documentaries. For example, in a European history course, one of us incorporates documentary making into a unit covering the period 1930 to 1945. While working on documentaries students have been able to locate many images of, for example, Soviet collectivization, Nazism,

or the Spanish Civil War.

The film festival environment should be planned to incorporate audience feedback and involvement in post-viewing conversations about the productions’ historical accuracy and, perhaps, aesthetic merits or deficiencies. Having students discuss each other’s documentaries contributes to the overall purposes of helping students become critical consumers of the past.

Student-produced desktop documentaries can also be central elements of every unit of instruction throughout a course. This strategy works best in a year-long class such as American history survey courses. The scope of such a course provides students with a host of topics rich in images, videos, music, and sound clips. With each unit, one or two students would be responsible for creating desktop documentaries on a relevant topic (e.g., late nineteenth-century immigration or 1960s protest movements) to be shown to the class. The showing of a single documentary with each unit (as distinct from the “film-festival” format of sharing) is conducive to fostering or refining historical thinking. The teacher and students savor these productions. The documentaries can be critiqued for use of sources or merit of historical arguments. If shown at the beginning of the unit, the documentary becomes a

common or shared reference point for subsequent discussions that arise later in the unit or course. When shown at the end of a unit, students can compare the documentary’s construction of the historical event with their textbook’s, or their own, interpretations. Such strategies, if repeated throughout the school year, involves all students in the processes of desktop documentary making, while cultivating and refining students’ skills of analysis, interpretation and critique. Each student’s production thereby becomes an important central feature of a particular unit of instruction.

Another approach to documentary integration is having the entire class produce a single documentary. Class time would be dedicated for students to find images and come to consensus on the documentary’s narrative line, the questions it explores, and the facts to be included in support of the narrative. Some teachers might feel confident enough to allow student leadership of such a project, whether as a whole class or in groups, with the teacher sliding into a facilitator role and encouraging student development of “do-it-yourself know-how.” Advantages to such an approach are opportunities for cooperation and a shared sense of accomplishment in a common goal.

## Conclusion

Desktop documentaries are a mode of history production and representation that generates enthusiasm, enabling teachers to refine students’ historical thinking skills and practices. We have found that virtually every student enjoys making documentaries and viewing each other’s productions.

Making competent documentaries, however, is not easy, and presents challenges for both teachers and students. Students will find that making documentaries requires a lot of work as they maneuver images and sound into a thoughtful narrative. Teachers need to provide instructions for students and

*continued on page 116*

## Tips from the Trenches

1. Create one yourself. It doesn’t have to be long or all that fantastic. But you should have a sense of what you are asking students to do, and you will be able to rewrite a better version of this tip list for your own students.
2. Anticipate technological snags. Preach in advance about backing up data, using flash drives, and planning ahead. Your own experience will help. Show students your documentary, while discussing with them problems you experienced as well as experiences you enjoyed. Have them use a rubric to evaluate your documentary, show students other productions appearing on video sharing websites.
3. Think about how to evaluate students’ projects. How objective can or should you be? By including specific requirements about text, number or type of images, length, and crediting sources, you create standards to help you evaluate the work. Be prepared to embrace subjectivity involved in your evaluation of students’ productions.
4. Have students write in some fashion about the experience of MAKING their documentaries. Have students write a brief authorship statement outlining his/her goals and the questions s/he wanted to explore. Ask them how it felt to have their work viewed and critiqued by classmates. How did their documentaries emerge and change in the process of making history?
5. Have students write about the experience of VIEWING documentaries. To help students remain attentive when viewing others’ work, teachers can ask the audience to write reflections or impressions. These comments might respond to a particular documentary, or synthesize, or compare information contained in student work on the same topic, e.g., Nazi propaganda.

## BLOGGING *from page 113*

- see Karen Burke and Rita Dunn, "Learning Style-Based Teaching to Raise Minority Student Test Scores," *The Social Studies* (July/August 2003): 167-170; Honigsfeld and Dunn, 220-224.
- The teacher's name has been changed to a pseudonym to protect confidentiality.
  - Research conducted by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Minnesota, and the Consortium on Chicago School Research demonstrates increased achievement among students who engage in authentic intellectual work in the social studies. See Fred Newmann, M. Bruce King, and Dana L. Carmichael *Authentic Instruction and Assessment: Common Standards for Rigor and Relevance in Teaching Academic Subjects*, (Des Moines, Iowa: Iowa Department of Education, 2007). Available at [www.smallschoolsproject.org/PDFS/meetings/auth\\_instr\\_assess.pdf](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/PDFS/meetings/auth_instr_assess.pdf).
  - All student names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.
  - Ibid.
  - Student interview, 5/6/09
  - Honigsfeld and Dunn, 2009, 221
  - James Banks, *Cultural Diversity and Education: Foundations, Curriculum, and Teaching* (Boston, Mass.: Pearson, 5th edition, 2006).
  - Edublog post, 3/22/09
  - Note that Lee (class 1) dropped out of school before the study ended.
  - Teacher interview, 6/2/2009
  - Tom Brush and John Saye, "A summary of research exploring hard and soft scaffolding for teachers and students using a multimedia supported learning environment," *The Journal of Interactive Online Learning* 1, no. 2 (2002): 1-12.
  - Gabriel Reich has demonstrated through think-alouds that although students may accurately answer multiple choice questions they may not understand the underlying content or be able to accurately explain factual information. See Gabriel Reich, "Testing Historical Knowledge: Standards, Multiple-Choice Questions and Student Reasoning," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 37, no. 3 (2009): 325-360. See also Samuel Wineberg for an example of the think-aloud strategy in research. Samuel Wineberg, "Historical Problem Solving: A Study of Cognitive Processes Used in the Evaluation of Documentary and Pictorial Evidence," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 83, no. 1 (1991): 73-87.

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## FAR BEYOND SHOW AND TELL

*from page 104*

help them get started on their projects. Investment of teachers and students' time and energy into documentary making offers big dividends. Students engage in meaningful and memorable work that will be viewed by their peers, thus spurring them to do their best. Most will be proud of their work, and many will want to share it online with viewers worldwide. Teachers will enjoy using documentary making to enrich and diversify students' experiences with history, while taking them way beyond show and tell. 🌐

### Notes

- Kathleen Owings Swan, Mark Hofer, and Linda S. Levstik, "Camera! Action! Collaborate with Digital Movie Making," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 19, no. 4 (March/April 2007): 17-20; Mark Hofer and Kathleen Owings Swan, "Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge in Action: A Case Study of a Middle School Digital Documentary Project," *Journal of Research on Technology in Education* 41, no. 2 (Winter 2008) 179-200.
- Swan, Hofer, and Levstik, 17.
- John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 43-49.
- Cecilia O'Leary, "Connecting to the Public: Using New Media to Engage Students in the Iterative Process of History," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): 1398.
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- National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1994), 34, 82, 133-144; National Center for History in the Schools, *National History Standards: Basic Edition* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), 59-75.
- Ibid., 59.
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