

To Create Media Literate Students, We Need to Start Making Media

Rachel Roberson

Back when I taught ancient history, my students loved exploring technological advances of the civilizations we studied. Naturally, we connected innovations like the plow and papermaking to the development of political systems and the spread of culture. But students also loved imagining a world where the compass was cutting edge, and technology was a rarefied realm open only to the elite.

Their world is very different. Today, an ever-growing number of classrooms, whether rural or urban, public or private, have access to media production technology. And today's laptops and tablets aren't only gadgets. They are libraries that reach every corner of the globe and contain almost all accumulated knowledge. The goal of the Great Library of Alexandria has been realized, and it can fit in the hand of a 12 year old.

So, the question is not whether we should bring the technological tools of the twenty-first century into our classrooms, but how. Highly publicized research (and other articles in this issue of *Social Education*) focus on what's being done to help students navigate and fact-check the flood of information at their fingertips.¹ Another key question is: How can we help students share ideas, opinions and learning safely and meaningfully in our increasingly connected world? In other words, how can students become fully media literate by creating their own media as well as analyzing and critiquing it?

Asking students to use and evaluate a range of multimedia sources and formats is a first step to media literacy, and many social studies teachers have

already started down the road. They have moved from traditional textbooks to diverse media formats, introducing historical information through video, audio and interactive timelines, infographics and maps. They ask students to think critically about the information found in these "texts" and use them to construct arguments and show what they've learned. But we consider students to be literate when they can both read *and* write. A reading-centric definition of media literacy falls short of the bar because it doesn't include a chance for students to create and produce ("write") media as well as read it. In fact, according to the National Association for Media Literacy, "in its simplest terms, media literacy builds upon the foundation of traditional literacy and offers new forms of reading and writing." Bottom line: If we want our students to be truly media literate, it's time to start making media in social studies class.

Both the Common Core and C3 Framework encourage student media-making, folding media literacy instruction into the standards, along with a renewed emphasis on speaking and listening skills. Students must not only

assemble and evaluate relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, but also connect this information "flexibly and dynamically." The C3 Framework asks students to present what they've learned using print and digital formats, specifically listing the internet and social media along with digital documenting tools.

With the standards lining up in favor of media creation and access to hardware growing, chances are you're already thinking about how students can use more than word processors and search engines. But who has time? One common myth about student media-making is that it takes much longer than traditional projects. After all, students must learn a production technique and only then can they put those new skills to work in class. In some ways, this is true. A lengthy video or podcasting project can take a few weeks, as would any culminating assessment. But "writing" media has become as flexible as traditional writing and includes the equivalent of quick writes and short responses. Moreover, the same skills students use to text, create social media posts and beautify their selfies can be put to use in academic settings. The next Ken Burns or Lynn Novik may indeed be sitting in your third period class, but you don't have to assign them a 10-part documentary to assess what they've learned about the Industrial Revolution.

At KQED, the public media station in the Bay Area, classroom media literacy



San Marino High School juniors Alex Uriarte and Aaron Im listen to various 90-second Flipgrid videos in Peter Paccone's U.S. History class in California. The videos, produced by their classmates, address the question of whether Christopher Columbus was a "hero" or a "villain."

is at the heart of our work. In the context of unprecedented access to flows of news and information and the networked nature of communications, young people need guidance to develop high levels of information and media literacies. Recently, our focus has coalesced around connecting classrooms to free, trusted sources for analyzing *and* creating media. Our goal is not classroom media-making at all costs, but media-making explicitly connected to academic content. As the humanities curriculum lead, my job is to help educators incorporate media-

making in a way that strengthens student learning and motivation in social studies, English, and other humanities disciplines.

Below are examples of media making in high school social studies classrooms. As you will see, there are many ways to get started.

The Power of Short Multimedia Responses

Peter Paccone, a history teacher at San Marino High School, and Scott Petri, a teacher leader at John F. Kennedy High

School in Los Angeles, both ask students to record videos of themselves on a smartphone or laptop as a regular class assignment. These short video responses ask students to take a stand on a current issue, adopt the persona of a historical figure or show what they've learned about a historic event. Paccone and Petri use the video discussion website Flipgrid to collect these student video responses in one place. The website lets teachers and students comment on videos, offer feedback and reply via video with their own views. Flipgrid isn't the only option; students can also share videos via Google Drive or other online spaces.

Why replace the tried-and-true written response with a video? For Petri, short video responses help assess what students have learned and make it easy to provide valuable interactive feedback. In a recent article on KQED's *In the Classroom* blog, Petri showed how he replied to a student video with a video of his own.² This format made it possible to help a student correctly pronounce key names in a speech the student was scheduled to give in front of the class. Sites like Flipgrid come with built-in feedback tools and even an emoji keyboard, which another Flipgrid educator turned into a visual rubric.

Like Petri, Paccone has found that students treat video responses differently than writing. The act of recording a response helps students build speaking and listening skills on a regular basis. At first, the video format intimidates some students, but they are able to view and re-record their responses as many times as they want, leading to even more practice. In fact, Paccone said, a strict time limit paired with the video format encourages increasingly thoughtful work over time.

"With every Flipgrid (video response), the students get better at responding within a 90 second time frame," Paccone said. "And this is in large part because they spend more time thinking about how to answer the question, rather than just saying the first few things that come to their mind. The exercise of prepping

for the video, then doing it, and realizing other students will watch and possibly critique motivates students to give their best answer.”

Audience Matters

Creating shareable media, like quick video or text responses, helps students reach a wider audience and often increases motivation and interest. While video responses might not be for everyone, asking students to share online text responses, often called “micro blogs” is a way to combine media creation with learning goals around crafting arguments based on evidence. At KQED, we have recently launched KQED Learn (learn.kqed.org), an online space where students can share their views on current topics and respond to what their peers around the country are saying. KQED Learn is open to classrooms nationwide, which widens the audience of individual students to other cities and states. This same type of interactive micro blogging can be done at the classroom level using Google docs or sites like Edmodo or Padlet.

Recently on KQED Learn, students from Virginia and California engaged in a spirited debate about the limits on free speech in K-12 schools. One high school student from Southern California wrote that freedom of speech was “over-rated.” A middle school student from Virginia and another high schooler from Northern California challenged his claims. The students cited sources, provided evidence and noted where they agreed and disagreed, bringing a level of civil discourse that’s increasingly rare in online spaces. KQED Learn, as with other websites used in schools, is password protected and only accessible to students with a code from their teacher. But just as important as teacher mediation and a clear code of conduct is the chance to exchange views with students in different regions. Using microblogging to connect with peers, like students do on KQED Learn, also helps students refine opinions, practice crafting arguments and evaluate claims made by others. Of

the 33 teachers who participated in the initial pilot of KQED Learn in the fall of 2017, 75 percent reported that their students’ ability to use evidence and interact online increased while using the site. They attributed this boost to the authentic peer audience on KQED Learn. When students create visual or text media messages that can be shared with others in a digital space, they not only make their own voices heard, but also are exposed to diverse arguments and interactions beyond their classroom walls.

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Visualizing History

Today every classroom computer comes with a variety of ways to easily combine text with images, audio and video clips and graphics. Whether it’s a slideshow presentation, infographic or interactive timeline, social studies projects that contain visual elements help bring history to life. Quoting FDR’s fireside chats in an essay explains what an American president wanted the public to hear. But listening to audio clips of those chats makes it easier to imagine the impact of that calming, confident voice on families during turbulent times. Digital archives let students link to primary source documents and embed them right into a multimedia project. Historical photos, speeches, music and videos help students experience life in different places and times in a way that’s only recently become possible

in nearly every classroom.

Bob Kelly, a social studies teacher at Minarets High School near Yosemite National Park, asks his U.S. History students to put Andrew Jackson on trial. In groups, students compile a multimedia collection calling for his prosecution or acquittal on several policies, including tariffs and the Indian Removal Act that led to the Trail of Tears. The project spans eight days and ends with an in-class trial and jury vote. To prepare their case, students create interactive timelines, maps, visual collections and documents, then share with classmates through a Google presentation.

“I try to get kids working in both text and visuals with as many primary sources as possible,” Kelly said. “We use Google slides as our main medium because it’s easily shareable and formatted for a variety of media.”

In Kelly’s class, the data visualization collections aren’t the final project, and the learning goals of the trial didn’t change when he introduced the interactive maps and timelines. Asking students to show what they’ve learned in a variety of ways helped him reach all students—and made the final presentations more fun for everyone.

“One of our points of emphasis at Minarets High School is public speaking as part of our PBL environment,” Kelly said. “I really like the visual element to the presentation and the different learning styles for the speakers as well as the listeners. Some kids are more visual and some are more verbal. I can see that in their choice of how to build and present their projects.”

Kelly introduces timelines, maps and other data visualization tools throughout the year. By the time students assemble their multimedia collections for the Andrew Jackson trial, they are familiar with the various production techniques. Kelly asks students to stick to free, online tools accessible from any connected computer, such as Google Maps or Timeline and StoryMap from Northwestern University Knight Lab (knightlab.northwestern.edu). The digital

formats let students link their projects to images and videos, creating media that show what they have learned and help others understand the historic time period.

I'm Ready to Start. Now What?

For Kelly, Paccone, and Petri, asking students to create media in social studies bolstered the work they were already doing. But making the transition from textbooks and writing assignments to interactive maps and video responses didn't happen overnight. These experienced teachers looked around, evaluated what media-making tools were available and, most importantly, aligned with their curriculum goals.

"I was afraid that using media would take too long, and that it would distract from what we were trying to do," Kelly said. "That didn't happen. [The students] zipped through the multimedia projects and were able to make them much more individual when showing their understanding."

Cost was also a factor. For most teachers, this means free or nearly free websites that students can access at school and at home.

Given the ever-changing landscape of education technology, it's sometimes hard to know where to start. There are big differences in the ways teachers and schools are able to use digital technologies to support instruction and student learning. Numerous factors play a role, including the presence of stable staff and support systems, the number of English language learners and at-risk students, pressure to improve standardized test scores, and students' level of experience with and access to computers at home.³ In many cases, professional development for teachers to improve their own media-making skills is hard to come by. Not surprisingly, teachers who lack the resources and training to improve their own skills feel hesitant to bring media making into their classrooms.

Video tutorials and enthusiastic online teacher communities are a growing source of "DIY" professional devel-

opment. Facebook groups and Twitter chats connect teachers to experienced peers who have traveled the same road. National organizations like NCSS and statewide chapters are also sources of ideas and professional development.

KQED Teach (<https://teach.kqed.org/>) is another resource designed to help educators boost their media-making skills and transfer those skills into classrooms. On KQED Teach, educators take online courses where they practice making media in a variety of formats, learn how to use digital media effectively, and develop strategies for transforming their classrooms. Courses range from digital portfolios to making infographics, timelines and maps to video storytelling. The courses and modules can be taken individually or in sequence as part of a cohort or professional learning experience. KQED Teach is a free resource for educators at all levels of experience and expertise, whether they're looking to make small adjustments or rethink their teaching practice.

Like Kelly's Andrew Jackson project, which asks students to use open-source online tools, KQED Teach is designed to work on any operating system, web browser, and device. It assumes students and teachers have access to smartphones for photography, video and audio recording, which lets teachers capitalize on the technology students already have on hand. No need to write a grant for a class set of video cameras. Research shows at least 75 percent of students have access to smartphones.⁴ Rather than asking students to put their phones away during class, KQED Teach and other professional learning communities encourage teachers to harness what students are already using in the service of deeper learning.

Moving Toward a Full Definition of Media Literacy

Social studies teachers unlock the past and help students discover themselves, their nation and the wider world in the decades and centuries gone by. We have, for the most part, left behind memoriz-

ing dates and studying only "great men" and embraced a more holistic view of the past that includes diverse communities and clear connections to our lives today. Helping students lay a strong foundation of media literacy that includes creating media, aligns precisely with the mission of social studies education in the digital age. When students make media in social studies class they access primary sources, make connections among people, events and eras, and craft arguments. When students publish their work online they have the opportunity to interact with peers in different regions and share their ideas with a larger audience. In response to the technology that now surrounds us, the C3 Framework expects students to share what they've learned in social studies beyond their classroom walls, taking informed action and participating in civic life. Joining this ongoing conversation means understanding how to make your voice heard at a time where technology is available to all. 🌐

Notes

1. Sam Wineburg and Sarah McGrew, "Why Students Can't Google Their Way to the Truth," *Education Week* 36, no. 11 (2016): 22, 28; Sam Wineburg, Sarah McGrew, Joel Breakstone, and Teresa Ortega, *Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning*, (2016) Stanford Digital Repository, <http://purl.stanford.edu/fv751yt5934>.
2. Scott Petri, "Using Flipgrid in the High School U.S. History Class" KQED Education (January 23, 2018), <http://ww2.kqed.org/education/2018/01/23/using-flipgrid-in-the-high-school-u-s-history-class/>.
3. Mark Warschauer and Tina Matuchniak, "New Technology and Digital Worlds: Analyzing Evidence of Equity in Access, Use and Outcomes," *Review of Research in Education* 34, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 179–225.
4. Amanda Lenhart, *Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview 2015*, Pew Research Center, (April 9, 2015).

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