

Producing a Documentary in the Third Grade: Reaching All Students through Movie Making

Bruce Fehn and Kimberly Heckart

Tyson, a third grader, was proud of the historical documentary he produced in Ms. Kim Heckart's class. Although he struggled with reading and writing, Tyson had listened to Ms. Heckart read stories about slavery, the Underground Railroad, and the uncertain freedom escaped slaves found in northern cities. Tyson studied images showing slave life and segregation, then used images and his own script and recorded voice to make a serious, four-minute documentary on the history of race relations in the United States.

This article details the work of third grade teacher, co-author Kim Heckart, as she engaged her students in making historical documentaries: a project that succeeded in reaching all of her students. For the last five years, Kim has required students to make historical documentaries. As her students produced these works, Kim conversed with them about responsible historical documentary making. For example, she explained to her students that they must use photographs from the time period (slavery, Civil War, and Reconstruction) in order to tell accurate stories of the past. Classmates, with diverse capabilities, talked amongst themselves about how best to tell the stories of slavery and African Americans' struggles with segregation after the Civil War.

In the course of documentary production, gifted students, as well as those who struggled academically, read history books (historical fiction and non-fiction), wrote essays, composed scripts and, as a result, developed and refined reading and writing skills. Before and during documentary making, Kim had students practice historical thinking strategies, which included analyzing of images and written sources. Each student engaged in the process of "sourcing," as students evaluated the motivations or biases of the person who took a photo or wrote a document.¹ Students compared documents and placed them within context of history of slavery and segregation. Kim modeled each strategy, and students practiced them in small groups.²

What is a Desktop Documentary?

Desktop documentaries are motion pictures students create using software such as Microsoft Photo Story or iMovies. Sitting at a computer keyboard and screen, students organize images, audio narration, and special effects into a short motion picture, usually less than five minutes long. To qualify as a historical documentary, students must be faithful to the historical images they employ. They have to write a historically accurate script that works with the pictures to provide a reliable account of the past. The third graders in this article used Microsoft Photo Story (available as a free download)³ to produce their documentaries, which contains simple, easy-to-learn movie making operations.

Eliciting Historical Thinking

We are not alone in recognizing the power of documentary film making to promote elementary students' historical thinking while enabling all youngsters to access the past. Like other teachers and researchers,⁴ we found that creating desktop documentaries generated enthusiasm. It opened avenues for serious discussion, while refining all youngsters' historical thinking skills. Consider the following exchange between Kim and one of her third grade students as they discussed this girl's production, "From Slavery to Segregation":

Student (S): *Maybe when we make this movie, we can at least be considered historians.*

Kim Heckart (KH): *Sure, when you study, research, and think about events of the past, you are a historian.*

S: *I think that is just as interesting as being like Steven Spielberg.*

KH: *Which image are you choosing next for your documentary?*

S: *I am on the part where slaves were freed, but they were still separated by Jim Crow laws. I couldn't believe that Jim Crow*

laws happened in theaters, in laundromats, at drinking fountains, and railroad cars.

KH: Which one of those images are you going to use in your documentary?

S: I think I should use all of them to show that segregation happened in so many places. Besides those are images we put on our class timeline, so I know they are all credible.

This conversation, concluding with the student's concern over the credibility of sources, gives insight into the rich conversations kids engaged in as they worked on their documentaries.

Sourcing Historical Information

Students' efforts to insure that sources were credible, as well as other concerns of historians that they took on, stemmed from Kim's presentations and discussions with them about the importance of using sources from reliable repositories such as the National Archives and Records Administration. Kim also explicitly discussed with students whether particular images were credible in light of historical information contained in other images, written documents, and secondary sources. From such conversations, third graders understood they were working like historians. The girl quoted in the exchange above understood that she was not producing a historical fiction film, "like Steven Spielberg." Rather, she and her classmates were drawing only from authentic accounts of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. Thinking as historians do, they demonstrated an understanding that some sources were more credible than others.



Dating When Things Happened

Making a documentary spurred students to think historically in other ways. In the decision to employ several images of segregation, the student referenced the classroom timeline. The timeline was a long piece of butcher paper with periods labeled: "long long ago," "1600s," "1700s," "1800s," "1900s," "2000," and "present"—with spaces between these chronological markers.

Given that slavery in the United States was a central focus of instruction and documentary making, Kim pointed students to the 1600s, when tens of thousands of white settlers and black slaves came to North America, either freely or under coercion. Kim had students affix "artifacts" to the timeline, graphics of any sort (such as drawings, photos of true artifacts, and newspaper headlines) that illustrated what was happening at that point. As these "artifacts" accumulated on the butcher paper, students learned how to "walk and talk the timeline"—to tell a story about what happened in history, moving from point to point

on the line. This exercise, Kim observed, "encourages students to compose narratives rather than memorize facts. I want the kids to contextualize where an artifact would be placed on the timeline, connecting [it] to what we've learned or to what's in their background knowledge."

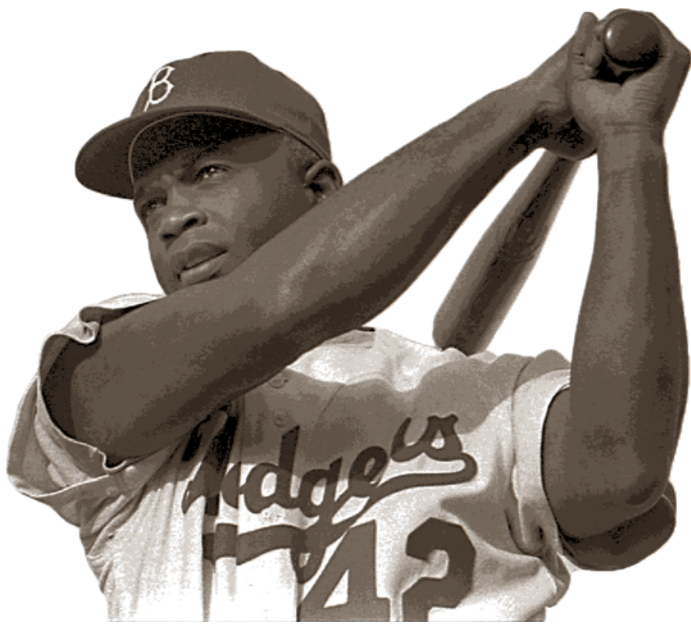
Walking and talking the timeline enabled students to articulate how they might use historical evidence to narrate stories from the past in conjunction with images that may appear in their documentaries. Kim, in addition, used conversational openings, such as the one noted above, to both monitor and extend a students' understanding. In other words, knowing that she wanted to cultivate students' historical thinking skills, Kim discussed with her third graders whether and how their image selections made good historical sense. At the same time, she helped her young historians ponder how and why they might use historical texts or artifacts to shape their documentaries.

Language Arts Skills

Documentary production also provided a powerful tool for developing students' reading and writing skills. In the course of preparing their documentaries, Kim's third graders read, or had read to them, stories such as Anna Kamma's, *If You Lived in the Time of Slavery* and Ellen Levine's, *If You Traveled the Underground Railroad*. In addition, students wrote expository essays on topics such as slave life and escapes to freedom. The third graders' essays, or parts of them, informed the scripts they wrote to accompany their documentaries. One student, for example, converted a book chapter he was writing, into his documentary script:

Chapter 1: Slavery. Long ago, Africans were hunted, shackled, and dragged onto ships. In the ships, people became sick and even died. When they got to America, they were sold to masters. They could be whipped if they didn't follow orders. The slaves did not get paid and could be separated from their families. Lots of slaves wanted to run away. They used the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad is a group of people who wanted to help runaways. Harriet Tubman was a famous conductor who went back to the south 19 times and saved over 300 slaves! There was a Wanted Dead Or Alive Poster for \$40,000 for Harriet, but she was never caught.

In a subsequent chapter "Freedom," this third grader described the tensions over slavery between North and South leading to the Civil War. In a chapter "Hard Times," he focused on sharecropping, segregation, and Jim Crow Laws.



In the student's final chapter, "People Who Resisted Segregation," the boy focused on the figure of Jackie Robinson to bring to a close his story of the freedom struggle. These words, too, found their way into the third grader's documentary script:

Jackie Robinson resisted segregation. He started playing for the Monarchs in the Negro Leagues. He was the first African American to play in the major league. He started playing for the Dodgers. Whites didn't want him to play so they threw food at him, yelled terrible things at him, and sent death threats to him. Jackie did his best to hold his anger in. He was awarded the Most Valuable Player and helped his team win the World Series. When he retired he worked with his friend, Martin Luther King Jr., in the Civil Rights Movement. Jackie died in 1972, at the age of 53, but we still honor him today.

These essays illustrate how, by fully integrating documentary making into her third grade curriculum, Kim laid a foundation for cultivating all students' literacy skills as well as their historical thinking. Students read their scripts into the Photo Story 3 software, which required them to coordinate their voices with the images that appeared in their documentaries.

MAKING A DOCUMENTARY FILMS WITH STUDENTS

Step 1: Pre-Select images for students to use in their documentaries

For the first unit of history instruction, Kim gathered a variety of images that students could employ in their documentaries. This insured that her third graders would not encounter potentially disturbing images, such as photos of lynching. Selecting photos for students also streamlined the documentary making process, enabling students to dive into the study of historical images and writing their scripts.

Teachers can download images from reliable sites such as the National Archives and Records Administration and the Library

of Congress into a folder on computer desktops. When students open the folder, they begin to select and place pictures into the Photo Story 3 software. As students integrated the images into the storyboard to tell the history of slavery and segregation, they often returned to the desktop folder to conduct research and locate additional images to help bring the historical event to life.

Step 2: Use an essential question, and link to the standards

The unit "From Slavery to Segregation," was part of the third grade curriculum and fit within standards of the Iowa Core Curriculum, spanning grades 3 to 5. Kim's essential question for the unit was, "How do people overcome adversity and become citizens who contribute to our community?" In answering this question, Kim explained, "We connected the period of slavery (which ended with the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865) with that of Jim Crow segregation (which lasted into the early 1960s). We examined systematic oppression and ways in which African Americans found ways to resist and eventually overcome it. In alignment with State of Iowa and District standards, Kim employed the method of documentary making to have students: "analyze historical photos," "sequence events (timeline)," "summarize historical events," and "explain conflicting perspectives of individuals and groups during a given time period."⁵

Kim used images from slavery and segregation as prompts to brainstorm with students what it may have been like to experience slave ships, slave auctions, or labor on plantations. Students analyzed the images to pinpoint slaves' experiences on the ships and in the fields. Students connected the images to stories they had read and artifacts exhibited on the classroom timeline. She brainstormed with them as to how the pictures might be used as part of a story about slavery and segregation. Students were then prepared to see how other documentary makers have told stories of the past; e.g., Ken Burns, who produced the most watched historical documentary to date, *The Civil War*.

Step 3: Show excerpts from historical documentaries

By viewing documentaries, young learners solidified their understanding of what is meant by the term 'historical documentary.' While watching professional and amateur documentaries, teachers can emphasize how a director, such as Ken Burns, aligned pictures with the narrator's voice to tell the story of the Civil War. Students can see how Burns 'moved' the camera across a photograph to probe a picture's meanings.

Showing excerpts from documentaries with the sound turned off helped students focus on the images. Students then recognized the importance of the order of the images in telling their stories. Studying the documentary maker's narrative script also enabled students to see how a narrator's voice gives meaning to the pictures and helps to tell the whole story.

There are, of course, many professional historical documentaries readily available to teachers. Burns' documentaries are especially helpful because he employed movie making

techniques that Kim's students also had available to them: panning, fading, transition effects, and voice-of-authority narration. Divided into roughly ten-minute chapters, Burns' *The Civil War* provided a convenient format for sharing video with students. This famous documentary, moreover, can be purchased online and is available through most state education agencies. In addition to professionally produced documentaries, teachers can share excellent amateur documentaries, produced by other students for the National History Day competition, many of which are available on YouTube.⁶

Step 4: Have students collaborate on the script

In addition to brainstorming with students, Kim worked with them to write their scripts. Script writing represented a new kind of writing for Kim's third graders. Students needed modeling and practice combining words and images to tell a story. Kim showed images to her class and asked students to explain what they might say in conjunction with the images. The class timeline, the long piece of butcher paper showing names and images of history, was a valuable resource for collective script writing by groups of two to three students. Kim had students "walk and talk" the timeline and describe the images, which helped them recognize that there was a story that connected the pictures. This story, together with historical essay writing, was the basis for scripts that they would write for their own Photo Story documentary production. Some students took their laptops and sat in front of the timeline to help ensure that their script and images were in correct chronological order.

Step 5: Select students who are tech savvy as coaches

Kim emphasized that the technology never held her students back. Selecting a team of student technology experts, however, both differentiated instruction and provided teachers with valuable instructional allies in the classroom. Kim trained a small group of third graders to become expert with documentary film making operations in Photo Story 3. As the documentary making got underway, these students assisted by trouble-shooting other students' problems. They helped their classmates figure out how to use Photo Story 3's special effects or maneuvers (e.g., panning, fading, and transitioning from one image to the next) to enhance their documentary.

Step 6: Show the documentaries

Children enjoyed viewing each other's work; most of all, they wanted their families to see their documentaries. Viewing the three to five minute documentaries at the classroom film festival allowed young learners to see the different approaches taken by their classmates—there were different narratives, even though students all drew from the same collection of images. Some short films were akin to picture books, whereas other students created movies that were more like chapter books. Both kinds of productions, the children discerned, provided information about the past. However, some offered a "bigger picture" than others. By employing more images than "picture book" documentaries, the "bigger picture" productions provided what adults term "historical context." These also had longer

ANNOTATED AND SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Among the many books Ms. Heckart used to teach slavery, segregation, and freedom struggles, students found the books annotated below to be highly engaging.

Battle-Lavert, Gwendolyn. (Illustrated by Colin Bootman) *Papa's Mark*. New York: Holiday House. Set in the 1960s, this is the story of a Southern boy who helps his father to vote for the first time, in spite of threats whites made to black people who wanted to exercise this basic right of American citizenship.

Coleman, Evelyn. (Illustrated by Tyrone Geter). *White Socks Only*. Morton Grove, IL, A. Whitman, 1996. This story, set in Mississippi, tells to the story of a young girl who accidentally drank from a 'whites only' drinking fountain and the events that followed.

Kammalt, Anne. (Illustrated by Pamela Johnson). *If You Lived When There Was Slavery in America*. New York, Scholastic, 2006. This book's Q & A format helped students learn about slavery in ante bellum United States history.

Levine, Ellen. *Henry's Freedom Box*. New York: Scholastic, 2007. Fascinating true story of Henry Brown, a slave who had himself

mailed in a wooden crate from the slaveholding state of Virginia to abolitionists in Philadelphia.

Levine, Ellen. *If You Traveled the Underground Railroad*. New York: Scholastic, 1996. This book's Q & A format addresses why slaves tried to escape and how they moved in hiding from the slave south to the non-slaveholding north.

Polacco, Patricia. *Pink and Say*. New York: Philomel Books, 1994. Say Curtis, a white Union soldier, tells the story of his meeting with Pinkus Aylee, a black Union soldier, and their imprisonment by the Confederacy. It's based on a true event during the Civil War.

Wiles, Deborah (Illustrated by Jerome Lagarrigue). *Freedom Summer*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002. Based on the author's own experiences, this story centers on two friends, one white and one black, who discover that, even after the town swimming pool is officially desegregated, whites in control of the town would close the pool rather than open it for everybody to enjoy.

voice-of-authority narratives to accompany the images. Kim used students' observations about how each documentary "told a slightly different story" to reinforce the point that different "real" (adult) historians make choices different from one another as they re-construct the past.

Although showing productions to classmates excited students, they regarded their parents as their most important audience. Parents viewed their child's documentary at the parent-teacher conferences. Because each child wrote a script and made decisions on which visual sources to include, parents got to view their child's own, unique perspective on the past. While viewing the documentary, the child explained to his or her parent(s) how the group used historical documents and technology to produce their documentary. During these conferences, parents, probably for the first time, viewed a historical documentary produced by a child from a unique combination of primary sources and narrative voice. They tended to leave impressed with what their child learned through this new form of history report.

Conclusion

We began this article with reference to Tyson, a third grader who struggled with reading and writing. While Tyson's film script was not as elaborate as some of his fellow students, he drew upon his capacities to analyze images and chronologically order sources to produce a brief, interesting documentary account of slavery, segregation, and the freedom struggle. Like his fellow students, Tyson analyzed and selected historical images to tell his story and wrote a coherent script to accompany the images.

Historical documentary making provides a pathway to the past for all students; those who are highly adept at using words and those who, like Tyson, work better with visual material. In Kim's third grade class, which was composed of children with diverse capabilities, students worked with images, words, and technologies to produce accurate historical narratives.

By fully integrating desktop software for documentary-making into her third grade curriculum, Kim Heckart continually linked documentary making with ongoing cultivation of students' reading and writing strategies. As such, documentary production provided valuable support for skills of reading, writing, questioning, analysis, inference making, interpretation, and narrative synthesis. The exercise of these skills, according to key standards documents, is essential for a robust elementary school history and social studies education.⁷ And, as Kim emphasized, her students "love it!" 📺



Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division escort African-American students to Central High School in Little Rock in Sept. 1957, after the governor of Arkansas tried to enforce segregation. Photo courtesy National Archives. Operation Arkansas

Notes

1. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2001), chap. 3.
2. Kim Heckart developed and used resources at Bringing History Home, www.bringinghistoryhome.org/about/introduction.
3. www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/digitalphotography/photostory/default.aspx.
4. Kathleen Owings Swan, Mark Hofer, and Linda L. Levstik, "Camera! Action! Collaborate with Digital Moviemaking," *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 19, no. 4 (2007), 17-20. See also Mark Hofer and Kathleen Owings Swan, "Standards, Firewalls, and General Classroom Mayhem: Implementing Student-Centered Technology Projects in the Elementary Classroom," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 1, no. 1 (2006), 120-144; Scott M. Waring, Marie Santana and Kirk Robinson, "Revolutionary Movies: Creating Digital Biographies in the Fifth Grade," *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 21, no. 4 (2009), 17-19.
5. The following are identified in the Iowa Core Curriculum, with sub-skills bulleted, as an "Essential Concept and/or Skill": • Understand cause and effect relationships and other historical thinking skills in order to interpret events and issues. - Understand processes important to reconstructing and interpreting the past. - Understand the historical perspective including cause and effect. • Understand how to view the past in terms of the norms and values of the time. • Understand interpretation of data in timelines. Iowa Core, K-12 Social Studies: Essential Concepts and Skills with Examples, p. 34 (pdf), www.educateiowa.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2331&Itemid=4343, italics original.
6. Ken Burns, *The Civil War* (documentary film, PBS, 1990). To locate student-produced documentaries, readers may go to YouTube (www.youtube.com/) and enter "National History Day Winners" into the search engine. This yields dozens of short, student-made documentaries, on a host of topics, that teachers may choose to share with students.
7. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning and Assessment* (Washington D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 2010), 70; National Center for History in the Schools, *National Standards for History* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, 1996), 14-38. See also note 5 above.

BRUCE FEHN is an associate professor at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa

KIMBERLY HECKART is a third grade teacher at Ridge Elementary School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa