

Bringing expert and personal voices into the classroom: Educational DVDs as pedagogical tools

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Last year, we created a model for an educational DVD that will help bring experts into classrooms in ways that are not practical with guest speakers or even video conferencing. The model DVD is structured topically, rather than by speaker, so the video is highly interactive and useful for both faculty and students throughout the semester. We propose expanding this innovative project by developing a new DVD for use by faculty partners in different disciplines at Elon. These new DVDs not only will have pedagogical purposes, they also will be best-cases for whether this documentary-style approach can be used effectively across the university as a way to pioneer an innovative approach to a common teaching problem and further Elon's national reputation for pedagogy.

Project Description

Overview

Every year we attend the Full Frame documentary film festival and bring a group of students. We are always amazed at the transformation that the Festival brings about in the students. They are energized by seeing the films but also by the expert advice from filmmakers, who talk one-on-one with the students and also answer questions about their films after the screenings. The students gain so much from being able to hear specifics about the filmmaking process.

So we started thinking about the classroom and ways to recreate that energy we've seen students bring back from film festivals. We were also concerned that communications students were not learning about the important genre of documentary in our core curriculum in communications. Many of the students who decide they really love the documentary do not find out about it until spring semester of their senior year. We wanted to create some classroom modules that could be used in our two core 200 level courses in the School of Communications. These two goals led us to start work on a DVD. Because the DVD could be created in an interactive platform, professors could use it for classes on many different levels. Also, because the documentary is inherently interdisciplinary, this could be used in classes beyond communications, to study the social significance of film or how film is an agent for social change.

The resulting DVD has the potential to mimic some aspects of the film festival that are so exhilarating for students and serve to transform them and their understanding of the genre and potential interest in it. Although students are not able to see whole films as they would at a festival, they are able to see clips from films and hear from the filmmakers too. Our goal of getting students interested and excited about the genre of documentary is achieved by giving students a chance to hear from famous and successful filmmakers as they talk about technical, legal, ethical and business issues. We think this is a potentially transformative teaching method because it taps into some of that energy that we have seen be so effective for students who are able to hear directly from filmmakers talking about their work. We all know that interested students are more engaged; we have seen this transformation happen. This DVD can bring it about for more students at different levels in our curriculum.

After spending two summers working on this project, we realized that we had created a formula for the educational DVD that could be used in other disciplines. This idea seemed useful for the following reasons:

- 1) To connect the Elon Program for Documentary Production, elondocs, to interdisciplinary work that benefits Elon classrooms;
- 2) Produce a classroom tool with serious potential for markets outside of Elon;
- 3) Add to Elon's reputation as national pedagogical leaders.

Plans for next two projects

We have already started work on a partnership with a faculty member in education and another in Psychology to work on a video that looks at parents of children in Title I high poverty schools, as a way to examine the complexities of family and poverty in educational psychology courses. Our faculty partners are Alexa Darby and Mary Knight-McEnna. They have outlined the following as their goals for this project:

Title: Portraying Connections (A DVD portraying the relationships between teachers and families of students in high poverty schools)

Purpose: To illustrate ways for school personnel to connect with family members of students who attend high-poverty schools.

Visuals: teachers discuss how they connect with families and possible bring in family members to discuss their relationship with teachers.

Vision: Interviews with teachers (elementary, middle and high school) and families different families.

They will identify the participants for this video and help to construct the necessary educational themes in the DVD, working with us in the interview and editing stages to ensure accurate and appropriate content.

Calhoun, a writer of literary fiction, will spearhead the effort to produce a DVD about Creative Writing. Kevin Boyle, of the English Department, will serve as a faculty partner. This DVD will identify key areas covered in the introductory creative writing course, exploring the many approaches and formats of the writer's workshop. Interview clips will provide insight into the lives, methods and writing rituals of established writers.

We have highly promising ideas for the next two DVDs, however, we really need the time to dedicate to producing these—to carve out the intensive time necessary to do these other projects would require course release and summer stipend. Plus, what we hope to form here is a guide for other faculty members to create DVD projects in their own disciplines, giving them a guidebook for costs and a play-by-play of how to create these, and how students can aid in the production.

Ethics and filmmaking

As filmmakers, we are sensitive to the ethical obligations of portraying real people in film. Because of the visual nature of the medium, we are not able to protect subjects with anonymity. The participants play a role similar to that of someone interviewed in a news piece. However, we go beyond the ethical standards established in the field of Journalism to ensure that the participants are aware that their participation is voluntary and they may decide to end participation at any point. They are not content

creators, but rather information providers whom we treat with sensitivity and care in all stages of the project.

Further, they are stakeholders who will enjoy both direct and indirect returns. For example, those who participate in the proposed films benefit from helping to create a greater understanding of the issues involved in Title 1 schools or the teaching of creative writing. These films explore issues that are close to the participant's hearts. As active practitioners in the field, the final DVD will provide them with insights from their peers that they can use in their own work. This direct benefit is, of course, shared by the next generation of writers and filmmakers who will learn from them through the DVDs. Participants will also benefit indirectly from the prestige that comes with being chosen as a leader in their fields.

While the creative writing DVD will feature writers talking about their craft and writing lives, the educational psychology DVD is a little different in that it is dealing with a more sensitive subject matter of families telling personal stories about their kids in school or teachers talking about challenges. But in both of these cases the participants will volunteer to be interviewed because they want to contribute to the larger goal of deepening the understanding of their respective experiences and provide a resource for teachers in their fields.

Connection to students

Students will be primarily involved in stages 2 and 4, but will be asked to evaluate the DVDs in stage 3.

1) Initial determination of the project

There are two projects that are presently in the development stage. The documentary filmmaker project is being tested in the classroom this semester. The educational psychology DVD is slated first for production with a production plan for spring and summer 2009. We have identified a few key areas for exploration for other projects and will pursue those if this project is funded. We will work with the discipline-specific expert to determine what type of content would be useful in the classroom and the best and most efficient way obtain these interviews. This will include a proposed timeline for the project and applying for necessary funding to travel for the interviews.

2) Production

Student crews will be used for the taping of the interviews. We will supervise those crews and travel with them for shoots. A student editor will be paid a stipend for editing the footage. We will hold regular meetings with that editor and work through the technical issues on the project. A student graphic designer will also be used to work with Calhoun on design elements for the project and also on a manual for future projects. We will workshop the design elements and final DVD along with the student and other faculty in the School of Communications.

3) Testing in the classroom and development of teaching materials

Stage 3 involves beta testing the DVD in actual classrooms to assess student learning outcome and teacher's perspectives on the use of the DVD as a teaching tool. We will assess the DVD through surveys of student knowledge, in-depth interviews with teachers and focus groups with students. These measures will offer a picture of student learning from the student and teacher perspectives, as well as interest and engagement with the course material in this format.

As we did with the documentary filmmaker DVD, we will place the DVDs in Elon and other classrooms to test them with real students. Faculty who agree to use the DVD will present part of the course through the DVD only and then students will be quizzed on the material. Faculty will then use supplementary ways of presenting the same material as they deem necessary. We will then conduct interviews with the teachers who use the DVD in the classroom to assess its effectiveness as a classroom tool and help construct the teaching material that will accompany the DVD based on the supplementary activities that they deem useful.

We will also conduct focus groups with students to assess their engagement with the content when presented through the DVD to determine what supplementary reading or activities might enhance the learning from the DVD. For example, in the documentary filmmaker project, the DVD booklet insert included a short bio of each person interviewed as well as activities and discussion points connected to each major segment. This will be the model for future projects.

We'll use the teacher and student feedback on the use of the DVD as a teaching and learning tool to improve our projects but also to incorporate into the guidebook that we will create for future projects. For example, the length and content of the modules on the documentary filmmaker DVD was chosen based on feedback from teachers and students about the number of topics they could deal with in each module as well as the ideal length for each module based on information processing and also use in the class time. We can use comments from the interviews as a way to flesh out the ideal length of DVD segments depending on the complexity of the information.

4) Marketing, distribution and creation of an internal Elon how-to guide

We will revise each DVD as needed from the feedback in stage 3. Once we have a final product, we will apply to work with the Elon student public relations firm to market the film and create press kits associated with it. We will work to find a distributor for the DVD, either with a textbook bundle or in an educational DVD distributor. We plan to talk to the entrepreneurship program and see if we might work together to launch these DVDs. Past experience shows that this is one of the more time consuming parts of the project. This is the part where improvements are needed. It will be a major focus of our scholar work. Elon can become a leader in this area and be known for its series of educational DVDs on a variety of subjects if we can come up with a solid marketing and distribution plan. Finally, we will produce a how-to guide to be used internally at Elon for those interested in creating DVDs such as this in their own fields of study. This guide will be used to help other faculty with future projects.

Our initial idea for this project came from a desire to bring professional voice into the documentary classroom. This project connects to Barnett's teaching in that she will use the documentary filmmaker DVD in her own classes. It connects to Calhoun's teaching in that he teaches interactive media, and this is an interactive media project. It also connects to a larger goal that we both have to develop more professional activity in pedagogical practices. Further, Barnett is the director and one of the founders of Elon's documentary program and Calhoun is a faculty member in that program. The elondocs program will be a linchpin in supporting these DVDs and will be the clearinghouse for their distribution. Elondocs along with CATL will be the primary avenue for future faculty interested in producing educational DVDs.

This project is intended to provide a series of educational DVDs marketed under Elon University to a national audience. They are by nature public and prominent.

Timeline for project

Summer 2009

Shooting, supervise editing and production of for Educational Psychology DVD and testing in the classroom. Continue testing and revision of Documentary DVD and negotiate distribution. Finalize art for Educational Psychology DVD and seek distribution. Start planning for production of literary fiction DVD.

Fall 2009 and Spring 2010

Write manual for production process. Work with another discipline to plan and implement production for another DVD based on the manual created and working through the elondocs production program. Continue production and Beta testing of DVDs in classroom. Prepare manuscript for presentation on the process of assessing these educational tools.

Fall 2010 and Spring 2011

Revisions based on classroom feedback and seek distributors. Finalize manual and launch internally to Elon faculty to encourage production of DVDs in other subject areas.