Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 23
Issue 1 *Digital Technology*

Article 7

1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation
Johnson, Val (2007) "How a $49 Webcam Turned a Class Around and Saved My Sanity," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1136

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How a $49 Webcam Turned a Class Around and Saved My Sanity

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My best ideas for teaching rush at me in the morning, usually when I have been struggling along with a class for weeks, hoping to inspire my students to love learning but feeling mostly like I am about to pull my hair out. It is in these critical moments when frustration and inspiration meet that I can make important pedagogical decisions. This is the story of one class, one webcam, and one idea—and the serendipitous decision that brought all three together.

Background

It all started late in the first semester when I received the class rosters for the next semester's classes: "Why do you hate me?" I said jokingly as I looked at the list of names. I sat in the chair in front of my principal's desk and joked again. "Seriously, what's the deal? Do you hate me? Did you happen to notice how many boys there are in this class? Did you realize that this class is right after lunch?" I am certain that my voice cracked and my eye twitched a little bit. As a teacher in an alternative high school, I knew that a class of 27 students—23 of whom were male, would pose certain unique challenges. Put that class after lunch, fill it with unique characters, and we might have fireworks. After she assured me that it was nothing more than a fluke, *and* that it was too late to do anything about it, she offered me this shaded compliment: "I figure if anyone can handle them, it's you." *I don't want to handle them*, I thought. *I'd like to teach them.*

Teaching at-risk youth is my passion; I know from past experience that they are dynamic, intelligent, insightful, and funny—yet it didn't change the fact that looking at that roster made me worried about how the next twenty weeks would go.

The Semester Begins and Frustration Sets In

When second semester finally began, we started the course together like thousands of classes across the country: the first few days were spent on activities to build community, to allow us to get to know each other and to establish that I had certain expectations for their achievement as well as their behavior. The class itself, called PASS (an acronym that stands for Practicing Academic Strategies for Success) was created to emulate the model described by Jim Burke in his book *ACCESSing School: Teaching Struggling Readers to Achieve Academic and Personal Success*. According to Burke, "ACCESS develops the skills and capacities you need to succeed in school in general and your academic classes in particular" (27). Like his course, mine was designed to "help you as both a student and a person in the year ahead" (29).

It took only a few class periods to realize that the challenges of that class went beyond their need to develop the academic literacies of school success; they struggled with academic *and* social tasks. Day after day, they would slowly trickle into class following 34 minutes of playing basketball during their 36-minute lunch. They panted as they walked through the door; many carried their wilted school lunches on foam trays in one hand while wiping their sweaty necks and faces with paper towels in the other. While I tried to quiet the class and get everyone settled into the routine of reading silently for 20 minutes each day, their need for liquids and their complaints that it was "so hot in here!" superseded all my requests for quiet. They rummaged through the cupboards looking for vessels to drink from: old coffee cups filled with pencils, a glass syrup pitcher, and a purple plastic goblet with a witch on the side were snatched, rinsed, and quickly became communal drinking cups. It seemed there were endless requests, complaints, and declarations: *It is too hot in here. Where is my book? Please be quiet, we're trying to read. Get out of my seat. I have to take a crap. Do I have to read? Someone stole my folder. Can I go get a drink? This book is stupid. Did you just call me stupid? Will you* ***please*** *stop talking?*

I started out intending to use all of the best practices that I valued and that had proven to be

successful with students in the past: I selected appropriate reading materials, differentiated instruction, allowed personal choice during reading time, and planned to teach valuable reading strategies. Despite some gains with individual students, the class as a whole was very resistant. Students wore headphones during lectures or discussion, refused to read silently, didn't do their assignments, threw anything that wasn't tied down, and melted down emotionally on a weekly basis when they saw that they were failing. At times I felt a bit overwhelmed by their indifference to my efforts, so I also cried, yelled, begged, and nagged when kids didn't (or wouldn't) do what was expected.

By March I was at my wits' end. Too many were failing, many of them vocalized their hatred of the class, and I felt like I had failed them—not just in the grades they received, but also in the part of me that they received. Movies and worksheets began to sneak into more and more of our shared classroom time. I felt completely defeated, wiped out, and humiliated by the time that 3rd block class was over each day. I allowed the class to earn a reputation as being ...my "bad class." In many ways my planning became more about keeping the students calm and compliant than about planning dynamic lessons that could show them the value of learning or the joy that could come from the pursuit of it.

Cracks Begin to Form

Throughout this trying time, one constant remained: I really did believe that I could win them over and that they could learn in meaningful ways. I decided to take control using what was within my reach. My campaign was subtle—to quench their thirst, I bought disposable cups and placed them in the cupboard; to help with the chaos of lost folders and books, I put their binders and books into alphabetized bins; and to help students connect with our daily reading time, I continued recommending books to students based on what I knew about them. I also put the class in charge of an important school-wide community service project in an attempt help them build community and common ground around something other than their identity as "Ms. Johnson's bad class." Slowly, the tension between us eased. My skin thickened, we found common ground through laughter and playing hacky sack even though I still wasn't able to get them invested in doing much of the work I assigned. And then, just when it seemed things would never get better, everything changed.

Frustration Collides with Inspiration, or, How a $49 Webcam Saved My Sanity

At the beginning of the fourth quarter we began reading a series of nonfiction articles. We read articles about of job satisfaction, the importance education, and the struggles that some students face trying to get through high school. The articles that held my students' attention the longest were the ones about dropouts—my students definitely understood and had something to say about the failure and the struggle to graduate. We had interesting class discussions during this unit, so as the time came to close the unit and to assess student learning, I dreaded the idea of asking my students to write essays, but feared what would happen if I tried something new. They had resisted almost every method that I had tried before, so I was worried that any lesson plan that I tried would not work with this group. I resigned myself to the essay assessment.

On the morning that I was going to type up the assignment sheet for this assessment, I found myself distracted. Rather than getting to work right away, I decided to send out a district-wide email soliciting donations for the community service project that I had put the PASS students in charge of. As I began editing last year's email message, I was further distracted by the webcam that sat on top of my P.C. monitor. I had recently brought the camera into the classroom with the idea that it might be a unique tool for reflecting on my teaching, or at the very least I might be able to take some funny pictures of students for the yearbook. I tinkered around with the camera for a few minutes before I clicked back to my email document. As I skimmed for errors and places where the dates needed to be adjusted, I had a sudden flash of inspiration. What if I recorded my message using the webcam? Within half an hour, I recorded a message using the software provided with the $49 camera, edited it to less than one minute using Windows Movie Maker, added a brief introductory title and closing, layered in some music, and prepared the movie to be sent as an email attachment.

Digital storytelling and digital movies were concepts that I had been interested in for quite a while; I had attended conference sessions, researched it on the Internet, and had looked for samples that I could use as models for myself and my students. I just hadn't had the opportunity to work with digital storytelling myself. I had learned from my work as yearbook advisor that assigning students tasks that involve technology requires that I have some firsthand experience with the hardware and software that I expect them to use. As I completed my final edits (I was struggling to remove approximately one second from the beginning of a video clip) my mind raced forward and began thinking about the PASS class. The frustrations of the PASS class, my dedication to best practices, and the realization that I needed to try something new in order to turn that class around, all converged in that moment. What if my students we able to make movies?

Prior to that serendipitous moment, I felt that my own lack of experience, the lack of consistent computer lab access and the very real struggles that had been plaguing the PASS class would make it impossible to attempt such a dynamic project. My reluctance was forgotten in the wave of excitement that arose in me during the creation of that one-minute video—I learned so much and had so much fun that I marched into class that day and said, "We are going to make movies!"

The Project (Interest + Opportunity + Risk = Change)

When I introduced the idea of making movies to the PASS students, I first had to admit that I didn't have much experience with this technology. I told them that I would do my best to be prepared and to help them learn, but we would have to work together to figure this thing out. As a class we spent the next two days reading more nonfiction articles and looking at samples of digital storytelling on the Internet. We examined the way that the authors of the videos used music, images, and text to create a point of view.

Watching my students struggle and resist nearly every assignment for more than ten weeks made me realize that this would be a pivotal moment in our class history. The risk that I was taking in attempting this project was palpable; I knew that using technology could be empowering for many students but intimidating for others. For this reason, I decided that the best way for us all to learn more about the creation of movies was to have a "practice" assignment based on a model that I would create. This practice assignment would serve as an assessment for the nonfiction unit, and as a risk free (pass/fail) opportunity to learn the technology.

During the two days that the class continued reading and examining samples of movies online, I began creating a model. I had been interested in documenting the struggles of my "at-risk" students and was anxious to use this opportunity to pursue my own interests and to provide the model that would scaffold student learning of the technology and some of the basic rhetorical skills of this new genre of composition. For my sample, I decided to interview three students about their struggles with schooling in general, focusing on their desire to graduate with a high school diploma.

I chose my interview subjects carefully from among those who volunteered. Manny was a polite senior, one who had struggled with learning disabilities and his own special education status throughout his schooling and would be the first in his family to attend a community college. Karl was a cocky, unfocused young man who seldom read during silent reading and who had considerable legal troubles. Jeff was a sensitive, popular, good-looking charmer who rarely did any school work but was tortured by his inability to maintain the dedication needed to do well in school.

During the interviews I sat at my desk and operated the camera while the students sat in a chair on the other side. The camera was turned to face the students as they talked. One of the advantages of using a webcam for this process (rather than a standard digital video camera) had to do with the fact that this type of camera is hooked up directly to a computer through the USB drive, allowing it to be operated with a mouse as we talked and eliminating the need to download video because the data is stored directly on the computer. (A webcam is intended to be used as a tool for live video chats and phone calls via the Internet, but can also be used much like a traditional video camera.)

As I listened to my student respondents, I began imagining their words as part of a dramatic composition, one that might be edited or enhanced with music and textual elements like titles. In a reflection recorded using the webcam, I noted the following: "As I was interviewing [Jeff], I noticed that there were going to be some really dramatic points in what he was saying. My point being that already, in this new genre of composition, this whole idea of making a movie was forming in my head. I was beginning to realize that were moments that were going to be dramatic, more dramatic than others."

The experience of creating the video caused me to draw parallels to my work with the National Writing Project. Just as the NWP believes that teachers of writing should be writers, I began to understand the value of using technology for teachers who want their students to use it.

After finishing the interviews, I reviewed the video clips stored on my computer's hard drive and began the complex process of creating a movie. I knew from watching movies that it was important to have an opening sequence that would include a title and some dramatic music, but I did not have much experience when it came to knowing how to do this.

Learning Literate Practices with Moviemaking

The process of creating a movie involved selecting a point of view, creating and collecting clips from the video footage that spoke to those themes, and then using text and music to shape the emotional impact of that point of view. At first I struggled with the logistics of the software and how to organize my clips so that I could create a coherent piece. I worried about selecting just the right written text to go along with the clips, and agonized over selecting just the right music. I used just one statistic from the reading material, wrote some of my own text, and selected music from a website (http://www.freeplaymusic.com) that fit the tone I was trying to communicate.

The movie that I ended up with, entitled *The Struggle to Succeed*, was something I was very proud of. I beamed as I showed it to my principal and the school social worker. I had successfully created an emotionally stirring two-minute narrative. The movie began with twenty seconds of titles and text, creating a context or point of view that the video clips would support. Throughout the two minutes of the movie, dramatic music played in the background, echoing the intensity of the students' words. The movie closed with text that created closure for the topic.

The experience of creating the video caused me to draw parallels to my work with the National Writing Project (http://www.nwp.org). Just as the NWP believes that teachers of writing should be writers, I began to understand the value of using technology for teachers who want their students to use it. Just as I understand student writers more clearly by working as a writer myself, I was better prepared to help my students use this technology because I had gained technical and rhetorical experience by creating my own movie. There were three main insights that shaped my decision to utilize this approach with my students and that informed my teaching of the technology and the compositional aspects of creating a movie.

1. Creating a movie is fun, captivating, and rewarding.
2. Movies have an emotional dimension to them that cannot be captured by printed text alone.
3. Movies are a valid form of literacy and can be used to express and design ideas and knowledge just as purposefully and powerfully as written texts can.

The Assignment

The assignment sheet for the project outlined a simple set of expectations and requirements: Students would work in pairs or triads to create a movie of no more than three minutes. The movie had to address the topic of struggle and their final product had to include printed text from the nonfiction readings, at least two edited video clips, transitions between clips, and appropriate music. Grading for this project would be pass/fail.

Students would work on this project in a computer lab consisting of eight networked computers, each having access to the video footage that I had collected using the webcam. The video footage would be stored on the district's network server, but could have easily been burned to CDs for students to use had I not had access to the server. It should be noted that this

project could be completed using still images or video footage, and could be assembled using PowerPoint, Microsoft Photo Story (available as a free download at http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/digitalphotography/photostory/default.mspx), or iMovie (http://www.apple.com/ilife/imovie/).

The class was given a short whole group lesson demonstrating the basic functions of the Windows Movie Maker software. I demonstrated to students how they would find the clips on the district's computer network server and import them into their projects, and how they could remove footage from the beginning and the ends of clips of video. I knew that I would provide mini-lessons on an as-needed basis for things like creating smaller clips of video from larger chunks, creating titles, and importing music.

On the first day, partners crowded around the monitors of the eight computers we would be using, confused by what to do or how to start. I moved quickly as I instructed two groups at a time about what to do: "Go to START, then click on PROGRAMS. Select Windows Movie Maker..." my instructions led them through the process step by step. Once the students knew how to start the program and import video, the questions became more focused. *How do I add music? How do I put the words in? Can I change the color of the text?* Many students became frustrated quickly and declared that they weren't going to be able to do the assignment. As I made my way around the room, I calmed students' confusion by walking them through each of the procedures that they asked about. Once the basic technical skills were mastered, students were able to begin piecing together their movies.

There were still behavioral issues to deal with, including keeping students off of the Internet and in the room, but eventually we settled into the pleasant flow of productive work time. A few students were reluctant to approach the computers and get started, and I addressed those students as I walked the room helping students who were already focused. I began to see a difference in the tone of the classroom and in specific students.

Prior to this project, Jeff and Karl had rarely focused on classroom tasks for any lengthy amount of time. Jeff was suddenly so focused that he had to be reminded to let his partners help with the video production. He brought in headphones so that he could listen more intently to the clips, becoming very concerned about the quality of his responses during the interview. Karl surprised me by choosing two partners, one a painfully quiet girl who had joined our class just a few weeks before. He saw that she didn't have a partner and asked her to work with him, taking special care to involve her in the process of creating the video.

One of the most dramatic transformations came in the behavior and effort of a student named Jack, a young man who didn't seem to get along with his peers and would often blurt out obscene words in class. His behavior had been so disruptive at times that my other students would yell at him and tell him to "shut up!" I was rarely able to have a positive interaction with Jack during class; before this project, our contact was limited to power struggles and redirection. Jack used the hall pass as much as possible during my class and was known to wander out of his classes throughout the day. He became a different person during the movie project: He was passionate and focused. He was inquisitive and concerned. He worked diligently in class and became a resource for other students as he mastered the software. He stopped using the hall pass, choosing instead to work for the whole class period. In addition to his hard work during class, Jack began asking for permission to come to the computer lab during his last class of the day so that he could continue to work on his movie. During his fourth block visits I was able to offer him some one-to-one tutoring about selecting and downloading music for his movie, and I got to know him as a person. We had some lovely and insightful conversations during this time, and Jack was able to get some positive attention from me.

Once all of the movies were completed (we worked for approximately three ninety minute class periods), we had a viewing in class. I invited the principal and tried to make sure that the LCD projector was working and set up correctly before we met. I'd love to be able to say that my students created prize-winning work and that the viewing went off without a hitch, but that just isn't the case. Besides the immediate problems we had getting the videos off of the network server, the movies (including my own) had some major flaws: problems with sound levels, spelling and grammatical errors, distracting use of transitions between video clips, and little use of the nonfiction texts were among the most obvious areas that needed improvement. Problems aside, there was excitement

in the air, and serious conversations were occurring. As the students watched their work on the big screen, they were talking about how to improve their movies. *I need to change the sound there. That music is too happy for this topic. We need more facts.*

The Implications of Risk

So what's the big deal, why is this rather unsuccessful attempt at movie-making an important narrative in the teaching of English? Why is this story worth telling? I've shared this narrative because it is representative of something I believe about teaching: taking risks is important. Risk helped that class and me get out of a rut, it helped me to enliven an otherwise dull curriculum making it relevant to the lives and experiences of my students, and it certainly resulted in unexpected learning! Despite their shortcomings, the movies brought out the best in these young people. They were no longer just sweaty, thirsty kids—they were students in the true sense of the word. They wanted very much to know how to do something that they didn't know how to do before, and they were willing to stick with the project even when they thought they wouldn't be able to do it.

I'll never know what would have happened to my third block PASS class if I hadn't taken that unexpected risk—we surely would have made it through, but at what cost? Taking the risk of using that $49 webcam, I remembered a few things that I had forgotten about teaching: that sometimes I let myself fall into the trap of focusing on managing students' behavior rather than teaching well; that taking risks is part of what keeps me excited about teaching; and that even the sweatiest, naughtiest, most resistant class deserves to have access to dynamic learning opportunities.

For those reasons, the project was definitely worthwhile and will feature prominently in this coming year's PASS class curriculum. This project allowed students to experience the joy of learning; students, who had previously had trouble staying in their seats for more than five minutes at a time were happy to focus for the entire 90-minute block. Though they didn't know what they were doing or what they wanted to say when they started, in the end they thought critically about which words they wanted to use in their compositions, and they worked very hard. In a class like PASS, where one of the lessons I try to teach is the power of perseverance in school, this was a valuable lesson.

The Future

Truth be said, the PASS students of this coming year will probably benefit the most from the mistakes I made and the risks I took during that semester. We'll still have silent reading time, and we'll still learn valuable reading strategies, but I'll reorganize the curriculum and start with that nonfiction unit next time. Our reading will focus on acknowledging what my students know well (struggling to get through high school), and we'll spend more time collecting interviews and discussing how to get our point across using movies. I'll share some great examples of movie making related to the topic (check out http://boostup.org for some wonderful examples) so that students will have a variety of models to think about as they craft their own movies. I'll present some lessons that make connections between more traditional written texts and the movies we'll be making, paying special care to emphasize that creating a movie is a sophisticated task, one that requires patience and practice. I also plan to use my webcam as a tool for reflecting on my teaching practice, talking through some of the issues that arise during the year, and for capturing my insights and planning process in a new way. I may even create a video blog so that I may share my insights and musings with other teachers.

Whatever happens, I'm glad I took that risk—it really did turn a class around and save my sanity. All for $49!

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About the Author

Val Johnson (johnson_val@yahoo.com) has been teaching in alternative education for eleven years. She is an active member of the Eastern Michigan Writing Project and plans to publish more articles about her work with at-risk teens in the future. She enjoys writing, gardening, walking her dogs, and reading.