Student-Centered Video Documentary to Engage and Empower At-Risk Youth

Sharif A Muhammad

Bridgewater State University

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the research question: How effective are video documentary projects at engaging at-risk students in the humanities curriculum and empowering them to create positive social change? The study took place at an urban high school focused on serving an at-risk, overage population. This problem was examined using a variety of sources, including relevant literature, the documentaries themselves, attitude scales and a student group interview. Student feedback about engagement in the project was mostly positive but results about the project’s ability to empower students varied. Students were able to use their documentaries to address the social issues that were important to them.

**Chapter 1 - Introduction**

## Importance of Study

Our competency-based, alternative school was born from the struggles with at-risk students who ended up in the margins of traditional education and ready to drop out. As a teacher over the past decade, I have met hundreds of at-risk students.  Upon meeting them, I would ask each of them the same question, “What led you to our school?” Students' stories gave me a deeper understanding of where they were coming from.  They told powerful and moving accounts of struggle and perseverance.  Their stories were scary, gut wrenching, heart breaking and painful.   They exposed the incredible strength and resilience of our youth, the harsh realities of poverty, and the failures of traditional public education. Everyone has a story to tell. I will determine if video documentary projects are effective in engaging students in their writing and making them feel personally connected to school. I will also determine whether or not creating videos for a public audience motivates students to try harder.

Students, complained about not fitting the mold and feeling like just a number at their old schools.  They said that their former teachers didn’t care and told them they would amount to nothing.  At first, I was skeptical.  It was hard to imagine educators saying such things.  What I have come to believe is that it does not matter whether or not those words manifested themselves verbally; the message was still being received.  The education system has been sending this message through standardized tests, history books, metal detectors in dilapidated buildings, prison-styled lunches, and oversized classrooms.

**Statement of the Problem**

My school is an alternative public school for students at-risk of pregnancy, homelessness, abuse, drugs, trauma, and often-undiagnosed learning disabilities. The school provides wrap-around student support services to tackle (or at least minimize) these difficult issues and allow students to focus on their education.  Teachers design and deliver an engaging, competency-based curriculum. This provides a more flexible path to educational success.  The school’s mission is to re-engage off-track students in their education to prepare them for high school graduation, post-secondary success and meaningful participation in their community.  We believe that it is our responsibility to engage and give voice to a population that has been historically unheard and underserved.

 This study explored the effectiveness of a video documentary project in reengaging at-risk students and encouraging them with the belief that they can create change.  It looked at the relationship between students displaying their work publicly and the quality of their work.  Did sharing their work publicly increase the quality? Did the size of the audience have an impact? As a technology instructor, this study informed the implementation of video projects in my own practice.  I am using multimedia to practice presentation skills and build professional confidence and competence.

**Description of the Program**

our

**Research Question :** How effective are video documentary projects at engaging at-risk students in the humanities curriculum and empowering them to create positive social change?

**Summary of Research Design**

In a combined Genre Writing and Multimedia class, students were presented with the challenge of creating video documentaries.  Prior to the assignment, they completed writing projects in a variety of genres and viewed and analyzed exemplars of professional and student created documentaries. Through a variety of activities, each group identified a challenge or achievement connected to themselves and/or their community.  They went through an extensive brainstorming, planning, and creative writing process leading to the development of a storyboard.  Students then used school video equipment to shoot footage in their own communities.  They edited their documentary footage down to five to seven minutes.  Upon the completion of their documentaries, students shared the documentaries with an authentic public audience. Afterwards, they filled out attitude scales and wrote brief written reflections about their experiences.  A three-student group interview was also conducted to collect qualitative data.

This study included three separate types of data collection.  An attitude scale provided a quantitative analysis of the documentary project’s impact on students.     Then, a group interview helped explore the effect of the project on student empowerment and engagement in the classroom. The attitude scales and group interview also examined students’ self-reported effort as a result of creating a presentation for a public audience. The third data point assessed the subject matter of the video documentaries themselves.

**Assumptions**

One assumption is that all students had access to the technology and time needed to complete this project. Another underlying assumption was that students entered this project with roughly the same technological and creative skill levels.

# Chapter 2 – Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the issue of disengaged youth, examine student documentary projects implemented in the past, and consider methods of evaluating the effectiveness of the project.  I began by looking at literature discussing why at-risk youth are not succeeding in American education.  I then summarized current research on student-centered documentary projects and their effects on different types of students.

The Problem – Disengaged Youth

 Clardy, Cole-Robinson, Jones and Michie (2001) examined critical issues involved in alienating and “miseducating” African American and minority students. The paper focused on three issues: the disconnection between the school curriculum and the cultural backgrounds and environments of at-risk students; the lack of connection between students’ experiences outside of school and the curriculum, and the absence of student voice in the classroom (p. 01). The research explained that students face a paradox where their school identities are not accepted at home and vice versa (pp. 4-5). The article also presented student-created video documentaries as a potential method of addressing all three of the discussed issues (pp. 20-21).

A study by Gullan, Hoffman and Leff (2011) revealed that students lack community sense and trust in the people and institutions impacting their lives, such as government officials, educators, police, neighbors, and other children their age (p. 32).

Lalas and Valle (2007) stated that it is essential for educators and educational leaders to examine the impact of ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexual orientation and disability on achievement in urban schools.  Through written prompts, a multicultural group of 35 students of who had recently graduated from urban high schools in Los Angeles were asked to reflect on their educational journeys (p. 79). The main social inequalities the graduates reported facing were: prejudice due to race, gender, class, culture and language, drug and alcohol use, generational differences and gang participation.  Students’ voices provided insight around how to improve urban education. Some solutions they identified were eliminating educational inequality, embracing multiculturalism, questioning and discussing our biases, and infusing history with ethnic content and diversity.   This research is an example of creating a platform for authentic student voice. It demonstrated how students could be empowered to create change by telling their stories (p. 79).

Examples of Student Documentary Programs

Schools have found that meaningful student involvement in shaping their educational experience is an effective tool in increasing their engagement in their classes and commitment to their achievement.  According to a student-voice-focused organization called SoundOut (n.d.), students were more absorbed in their educational experiences when they made a “psychological investment” in learning. This caused them to try harder in learning the curriculum and applying their learning to their lives. Research has also indicated a link between student reports of satisfaction with their school and academic achievement. (The Education Alliance, 2004)

A Littleglobe’s Teen Film Project called “Turn the Lense” provided an example of multimedia used as an educational tool to lift voices that typically would not have surfaced.  “Turn the Lens” provided high school students with the opportunity to empower themselves and their communities by telling their personal stories through documentaries.  In the creation of these documentaries, students were able to practice creative and personal narrative writing, filmmaking, conducting interviews, and video editing.  The documentaries opened public dialogue about issues at the core of the students’ communities.  According to a case study about the project:

“Turn the Lens” filmmaking program is providing the means to externalize the intimate world of each of our students—giving them the time, space and a forum to explore and share personal experiences that are unique compared to the outlets of expression afforded to teenagers in the community today (Jonas, 2014).

Wake (n.d.) provided a parallel theme of identity development through digital storytelling with a rural population, a setting contrary to this research project.  The 7th and 9th graders in this study were asked to create digital stories exploring their lives as teens in the rural south.  Students were told that the project would include a public showing of their work, which identified an authentic public audience.   Wake states that there is a common search for identity that is prevalent in teenagers regardless of geographic context.  He also validated the use of technology and digital storytelling to promote student voice and identity in a digital format that they are accustomed to using (Wake, n.d., p. 34).

Cynthia Kelly Chun (2005) used a student-centered video documentary project as a tool to validate students’ cultures and experiences and allow their voices to emerge.  These San Diegan students ranged from 14 to 17 years old with reading levels that spanned from fifth to tenth-grade.  Chun reported that students who were typically reluctant writers were diligently writing up their storyboards.  Throughout the creation of the documentary projects, students were fully engaged, responsible, and independently on task.  They very quickly became experts in the video editing software with very little assistance or guidance from their teacher (p.34). She was, concerned at one point, as students used their freedom in creating the videos to insert a somewhat vulgar song.  Because students were creating videos for an in-class viewing and not a larger, more distinguished audience, they chose music that would be considered favorable to their classmates (p. 35). This case study suggests that students consider the audience when creating digital media, which may impact their effort and creative choices.

Steven Goodman’s case study (2010) is another model of the successful implementation of a student documentary project with a similar population to this research project. Goodman described urban, overage 8th graders who were considered at-risk and reluctant writers. In his project, students were highly engaged in their writing as the content, purpose and social context of documentaries based on social issues differed from traditional essays and book reports. Students assumed new identities as documentary-makers. Goodman’s description of a student-centered video project was supported with research from learning theories such as double abstraction, and cognitive apprenticeship.

**Double Abstraction** - Goodman cites Vygotsky's description of writing (p. 50) as doubly abstracted from the sound and rhythm of spoken word and from an actual person with which we dialogue.  Using documentary styled projects grounded in social contexts to write for different purposes and audiences allows students to reconnect with the rhythms of language and interaction on many different levels.

**Cognitive Apprenticeship** - The Apprenticed Learning Theory suggests that an apprenticeship environment engages students as they face real, open-ended problems with changing variables and real-life constraints. These challenges provide them with authentic opportunities for practice, experimentation, trial and error (Goodman, 2010, p. 54).

#### Going Public: Exploring the benefits of publicly exhibiting work

Very little research has surfaced about the link between students creating work for a public audience and their academic achievement. The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), named demonstration of mastery through public exhibition, as one of its core principles (Coalition of Essential Schools). Laura Baker (2007) confirmed CES’s belief that the standards of projects were raised when presented to authentic audiences.  Baker stated that having outside jurists and audience members caused students to invest more fully in their projects.  It also set the stage for self-reflection and insight (p. 3).  No articles were found that used quantitative data to link publicly exhibited work with student effort and academic performance.

#### Evaluating the Impact of Student Documentaries

Assessing the effectiveness of projects that support youth voice is vital in validating them as a means of engaging and empowering at-risk youth. Campbell, Hoey and Perlman (2001) explained that youth voice programs instilled in students a dedication to social action and used the student created media to impact the broader community (p. 10).  Youth media often had a focus on bringing out voices that were typically not heard, such as youth that is rural, urban, at-risk, poor, minority, gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The authors pointed out that Renee Hobbs (as cited in Campbell, Hoey and Perlman, 2001), described a view that media production was an educational dumping ground for non-readers and low skilled students. Despite this negative reputation, youth and staff, through anecdotes, noted the positive effects of youth media, including caring relationships within the programs, social change and advocacy, and career and skill development.  However, the authors cautioned that multiple anecdotes are not solid evidence.  There has been an apparent lack of research on the impact of youth media on the students themselves, audiences and society (p. 20).  One piece of literature that was cited was Pennebaker who determined that translating difficult emotional experiences into language changed peoples’ thinking around the experience.  Using oral or written language to describe those experiences helped people cope with life issues more effectively (as cited in Campbell, Hoey and Perlman, 2001).  The question still remains about how to accurately measure such psychological progress.

Kinkade and Macy (2003) offered a series of case studies describing what was working with youth media. They also examined some of the challenges in effectively evaluating the impacts of youth media.  Measuring the amount of times a story was viewed was only a part of the full picture.  The impact on individual students in the program was important, but difficult to actually measure.  It could take years for young learners to be able to articulate which experiences really impacted their lives (p. 11).  The article pointed to evidence that youth media had impacted adult audiences and changed their perception of what children were capable of (p.40).

Inouye, Lacoa and Henderson-Frakes (2004) further explained the challenges in assessing the impact of youth media as a whole.  The diversity of youth media programs made it difficult to find shared best practices and principles.  The broad identity of youth media further complicated the already difficult task of measuring its impact.  Also, youth media could not be measured in the same manner as mainstream media.  An organization that was much more concerned with the impact on the young people creating the media (as opposed the impact on an audience) would not measure its success by the number of people the media has reached (p. I-3).  While 58% of media groups were measuring the impact of their programs, these measurements revolved around the reach of their products and the audience’s reactions (p. IV-2).  Very little data had been collected to measure the impact of digital media on its adolescent creators

**Conclusion**

It is evident in this literature that student documentary projects geared towards at-risk student populations have been completed and studied in the past.  Most of the literature suggested that efforts to engage and motivate students could be addressed in a student-centered documentary project similar to the one outlined in the next section. Very little research provided sufficient data to measure the social and educational effectiveness of such projects.  In this research project, I collected qualitative and quantitative data to fill in some of these data deficiencies in the educational impact of student documentaries and performance impacts of public audiences.

# Chapter 3 – Research Design

The essential question of this project was: How effective are video documentary projects at engaging at-risk students in the humanities curriculum and empowering them to create positive social change? This study explored the effectiveness of a student-centered documentary project through the lens of student engagement in writing and empowerment in creating positive change. Students worked on their documentaries during the first seven weeks of the trimester. I then collected data using mixed methods including quantitative and qualitative instruments. The quantitative data was collected using the computer-based Documentary Impact Attitude Scale (see Appendix A). It was analyzed to get a broad picture of the effectiveness of the program on all participating students. Qualitative data was collected through a three-student group interview (see Appendix B). The third data source explored the content of the documentary videos.

#

# Sample

* Participants in this study were the students who were registered for a class entitled: Lift Every Voice, a hybrid course that combines Genre Writing and video production.
* Students in entire school are considered at-risk and over aged, ranging from 16-21 years old. Our school does not have grades. Students in this class fell between the ninth and tenth grade.

# Approval From the Research Site

A letter of permission for this study has been obtained from the principal. The school acts as its own district, so no further permission will be necessary.

# Materials

*Materials for my study will include:*

* Adobe Youth Voices – Telling My Own Story curriculum[[1]](#footnote-1)
* 10 digital video recorders with accessories
* Video recording accessories (lighting kit, tripods, microphones, carrying cases)
* Sign out sheet for students taking video recorders home
* 10 Computers with Adobe Premiere
* Documentary Impact Attitude Scales
* Rubrics to assess video documentaries

# Procedure

### Documentary Impact Attitude Scale

Documentary Impact Attitude Scales were distributed using (SurveyMonkey.com) to all students who completed the class. (20-30 students). Because of the population at the school, students have significant attendance problems. As a result, many students do not participate in or complete courses due to attendance. A case study with a purposeful sample of students allowed me to focus on the students who were able to complete the course. Students were given a link to follow to fill out the online Documentary Impact Attitude Scales . It was made explicit to students that their responses on the attitude scale would be kept confidential. While the statements used on the attitude scale are color-coded and categorized in Appendix A, they were be randomized for participants. Students were asked for passive consent at the beginning the Documentary Impact Attitude Scale.

### Group interview

I randomly selected three students to participate in a group interview, which added depth to the exploration of impacts on students. A random drawing eliminated any teacher bias. It also ensured that data was collected from students with a range of skills, engagement levels, and attitudes.

###

**Data From Documentary Videos**

The content of student documentaries were coded for content. To explore the social issues addressed in the videos, they were then explored for trends in topics and idea units.

### Timeline.

### I collected and analyzed data for approximately one month.

1. **Weeks 1-7** - Students worked on their videos.
2. **Week 8 -** Distributed Documentary Impact Attitude Scales using SurveyMonkey (an online survey). Students had time to complete surveys during class.
3. **Week 9** - Randomly selected students and conducted group interview.
4. **Week 10** - Analyzed Quantitative data.
5. **Week 11 -** Analyzed Qualitative data.

# Analysis of Data

### Quantitative Analysis. I collected data from each question in the Documentary Impact Attitude Scale. Results for the attitude scale were used to inform the group interview. The goal of the quantitative analysis was to rate data in the following four areas (color coded to match attitude scale):

* **Connection to School** - To what extent did students feel connected to the school through this project?
* **Engagement in Curriculum** – To what extent did students find this curriculum engaging?
* **Empowerment in Creating Positive Change -** To what extent did students feel empowered through this project?
* **Effort and Going Public** - To what extent did students connect effort with going public with their work?

### Qualitative Analysis. The qualitative analysis helped deepen my understanding of how this project is impacted students. It also may helped me understand why the project was effective or ineffective as a tool for engagement and empowerment. To more easily identify trends in the group interview, responses were sorted into the same four categories as the quantitative data:

* **Connection to School**
* **Engagement in Curriculum**
* **Empowerment in Creating Positive Change**
* **Effort and Going Public**

**Video Analysis.** I analyzed the content of the videos to determine which social issues students explored. In the analysis, I also looked at the depth at which they explored each issue. For example, did they just talk about the issue, or attempt to work towards resolving it? I sorted the social issues that emerged into five categories:

* **Bullying** –Physically, verbally, or emotionally intimidating or domineering others.
* **Self Harm** - The act of physically hurting oneself.
* **Distrust of Others** - A lack of faith and certainty in peers and other impactful members of a social network (government officials, educators, police, neighbors, and other children their age).
* **Stereotypes** – A simplified and generalized concept of a particular group of people.
* **Social Justice** – The dispersal of advantages and disadvantages to people within a society.

**Conclusion**

 My goal was to create a simple research design that could produce meaningful qualitative and quantitative results. I combined the attitude scale with the group interview to allow students to provide feedback privately and more intimately. I collected data from the content of the student documentaries to provide a sample of the types of social issues students addressed. This research was designed to be transferrable to a larger sample size.

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**Chapter 4 - Results and Conclusions**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the research question: How effective are video documentary projects at engaging at-risk students in the humanities curriculum and empowering them to create positive social change? This chapter reports and analyzes the results of data collection instruments outlined in the previous chapter.

**Results**

I distributed a Google Forms survey at the beginning of a class period on December 17, 2014. The survey targeted a purposeful sample of nine students who completed the project. Nine of the ten targeted students consented electronically and completed the survey. The survey included three open response questions and 23 attitude scale statements. I distributed the attitude scale through a hyperlink on the class website.

As indicated in Table 1, seven of the nine respondents either strongly disagreed (n=4) or disagreed (n=3) with the statement, “I DID NOT feel personally connected to what we are doing in class.” No students strongly agreed or agreed that they did not feel personally connected to the course content while two students remained neutral.



According to the results, four of the nine respondents found this class more engaging than other humanities classes, while the remaining five remained neutral.  No respondents indicated finding the class less engaging than other humanities classes.

Five of the nine respondents either agreed (n=1) or strongly agreed (n=4) with the statement, “Overall, I found this course engaging”.  One student disagreed with the statement and three remained neutral.

Eight of the nine students in this course believe that the teachers cared about their lives outside of school.  Seven strongly disagreed and one disagreed with the statement, “My teacher DOES NOT care about my life outside of school.”  One student strongly agreed with the statement.

Responses indicated that five of the nine students believed that this project allowed them to get to know their classmates personally.  Two students disagreed and the other two were neutral.

According to the results, six of the nine students felt strongly that classmates and teachers acknowledged their feelings.  Three of students remained neutral, while no students indicated that their feelings weren’t acknowledged.

Four of the nine students given the attitude scale believed that they could create change in their community (two agreed and two strongly agreed).  Four respondents remained neutral while one disagreed.

According to the results, five of the nine students believed that others wanted to hear their stories.  Three strongly disagreed and two disagreed with the statement, “Others DO NOT want to hear my story.” Four remained neutral.  None of the students felt that others did not want to hear their stories.

Four of the nine respondents felt that knowledge of a large audience viewing their work made them work harder.  Two strongly disagreed and two disagreed with the statement: “Knowing that a large audience would see my work DID NOT make me work harder.”  Four respondents remained neutral and none agreed with the statement.

**Interview Findings**

I conducted a face-to-face group interview with three students who had participated in our video documentary project. I chose to complete the interviews on a portfolio day where students were dropping in throughout the day. I selected the first three students who were available at the scheduled interview time. The interview took place in a meeting room and lasted for about 15 minutes. The interviewees consisted of two males and a female. For the confidentiality of the interviewees, I changed the names of all three students. I have also changed the name of my partner teacher to Ms. Doe. I recorded and transcribed audio from the interview. I placed the interview questions in the following four categories:

* **Connection to School** - To what extent did students feel connected to the school through this project?
* **Engagement in Curriculum** – To what extent did students find this curriculum engaging?
* **Empowerment in Creating Positive Change -** To what extent did students feel empowered through this project?
* **Effort and Going Public** - To what extent did students connect effort with going public with their work?

 ***Connection to School****.* All three interviewees reported feeling more connected and closer to students and teachers as a result of this project. While John reported feeling a little bit more connected, Kirk stated, “Yes. Umm, I made new friends in the class that I wouldn’t talk to before and I got to you know you and Ms. Doe which, I didn’t know either before.” Two of the students reported feeling more connected to school as a result of this project because they made new friends and got to know new teachers. Students whom I had not known prior to the project now warmly greet me in the hallways.

***Engagement in Curriculum.*** Responses about students’ level of engagement varied. Jane remained neutral and stated, “I don’t know.” John, whose group created a video about bullying replied, “Umm, I didn’t really feel connected because I never really got bullied. I never got bullied so - I don’t know how that feel.“ Kyle stated, “ I don’t know. I was engaged. I mean, those stereotypes are real so - yea. I felt engaged, but the other ones (the subjects of other videos), I don’t know. I never got bullied. The other ones, like watch your surroundings, yea - I already knew that.”

 When asked what they’ve taken away from the documentary project, John simply answered, “how to make videos”. Jane said that she got to learn other peoples’ stories and struggles as well as some statistics about social issues. Kyle replied, “Learning other people’s lifestyles. To be honest, I don’t really know. That’s all that I can say.”

***Empowerment in Creating Positive Change.***  “Um, no cause, it’s just like - there’s millions of people in the world and there’s just us. We’re just one person and I’m pretty sure somebody made a video, not saying the same thing, but something similar to our point that we were trying to argue. The other two interviewees responded, “I say what he said,” and, “I agree too.”

***Effort and a Public Audience.*** Students presented their documentaries to a public audience (teachers, parents, partners, board members, and community members) during the school’s annual symposium. Interviewees gave mixed responses when I asked: If you knew up front that your teacher would be the only one to see your videos, would that have made any difference in how it turned out? John replied, **“**Yea, cause it would’ve been like, ‘Ah man. Why can’t I just tell you?’ It’s like. It’s just only ya’ll watching it, so we shouldn’t go as hard, trying to make it all nice and stuff.” On the contrary, Jane answered, “Well, I think I would’ve done better because I would’ve know it was for the sole purpose of a grade, so I would’ve tried way harder and like, been way clearer and stuff.” My partner teacher and I did count the video projects as part of students’ overall grades. I also asked the students if they kept their audience in mind when creating their documentaries. John answered, “I didn’t really… I didn't do a video like, of myself, so I really don’t know. I think she [my partner in the project] did a good video. A lot of people will watch that video. It’s kind of sad. I think she did keep people in mind cause she told people, umm, whoever is getting bullied around her [to] speak up about it. Speak up and don’t just let it happen.” Kyle responded, “You have to throughout the whole time you’re telling the story. If not, they just gonna think it’s boring or lose focus, right? That’s how I think. Yea, you have to.”

At the end of the interview, I asked students how they felt about the project now that it has been completed and seen by others. John and Jane both said that they were glad that it was over. Regretfully, I did not push them for a more detailed response. Then Kyle responded, “I feel that somebody’s going to learn from it. Like, somebody out there is going to learn from all the videos or [they will] at least guide them.”

**Video Findings**

 I divided the content of the completed videos into different idea units. I considered each phrase in a video as a separate idea unit. The five completed videos produced a total of 163 unique idea units. The number of times that a particular idea unit appeared in the videos showed the extent in which it was covered in the documentaries. I sorted the idea units into the five broad themes, which are detailed in Table 2.

* **Bullying** –Physically, verbally, or emotionally intimidating or domineering others.
* **Self Harm** - The act of physically hurting oneself.
* **Distrust of Others** - A lack of faith and certainty in peers and other impactful members of a social network (government officials, educators, police, neighbors, and other children their age).
* **Stereotypes** – A simplified and generalized concept of a particular group of people.
* **Social Justice** – The dispersal of advantages and disadvantages of people within a society.

*Table 2 - Video Content in Idea Units*



 The content of the video documentaries fell under the themes of: Bullying, Distrust in Others, Self Harm, Social Justice, and Stereotypes. In their documentary projects, students explored the causes, impacts, resolutions and responses for each theme. Bullying was a theme that was heavily covered in the documentaries. While conducting research for her documentary, one student surveyed 60 of the school’s 300 students about bullying. She found that 43% of our students reported that they had been bullied. The video about self harm showed three students who admitted to cutting themselves in the past and pleaded for their peers to look for better alternatives. In a third video, students identified how they have been inaccurately stereotyped and have redefined their identities beyond those stereotypes.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The research indicates that students’ responses to the documentary project were mostly positive. While I anticipated this result prior to conducting the research, it was a surprise after teaching the course. My partner and I faced constant resistance from students on a daily basis (see Limitations section). I expected some resistance, since the majority of the students were struggling writers taking the course for the second or third time.

Five of the nine students who completed the course found it engaging and three students were neutral. Only one student was reportedly not engaged in the course. Four of the nine students found this format of combining Genre Writing course with a video documentary project more engaging than a typical humanities class at our school. The remaining students were neutral. No students reported finding this format less engaging than a typical humanities class at our school.

Students’ comments indicated that they are personally connected to the course material, classmates and teachers. Eight of the nine surveyed students reported that they felt their teachers cared about their feelings. They also reported feeling closer to their teachers and classmates as a result of this project. These are positive signs that we are reaching this disenfranchised population of students on personal level.

Students shared personal and sometimes tearful accounts within each social theme. They used the videos to send messages to victims, offenders, and the general public. The messages, and their delivery, suggest that students believed in the documentaries as potential vehicles for social change. In the attitude scale, four of the nine students believed that they could create change in their community; one student believed that they could not, and the remaining four were neutral. In the attitude scale, students reported believing that people cared about their stories and want to hear them. These findings were contradicted by the group interview, in which all students agreed that they would not really be able to create change with their projects. In hindsight, I realize that this question needed to be posed with a more specific scope of “change”.

An overarching theme throughout the videos was a distrust of people including friends, peers and authorities. This aligns with research by Gullan, Hoffman and Leff (p. 32) that revealed a lack of community sense or trust in people in institutions that impact their lives (government officials, educators, police, neighbors, and other children their age).

Our students used their documentaries to examine and define their identities. In one project, students first identified common stereotypes that they had heard about themselves. They then replaced those stereotypes with more positive and accurate descriptions of their own individual identities.

Laura Baker and the Coalition of Essential Schools (2007) tell us that having outside jurists and audience members increases student investment in their projects and creates opportunities for reflection. My own results regarding the correlation between student effort and presenting to a public audience were mixed and inconclusive.

**Limitations**

The video documentary project was embedded in a Genre Writing class that had many struggling writers who were taking it for the second or third time. This scenario presented some unanticipated limitations. My colleague and I frontloaded many of the writing lessons and assignments in the first two weeks because we had so much writing material to cover. As a result, students immediately showed a great deal of resistance, which continued throughout the month, particularly during the writing parts of the projects.

During project month, student absenteeism was higher than usual. Our attendance policy was designed to drop students who had missed more than three of the twelve full days of the project. When students were in a project all day, missing a single day was enough to leave them significantly behind. Over project month, the class roster dropped from 27 to 10 students. Finding students who fit the criterion of completing the course created a limited sample size of nine students. Nine of the ten students who attended the course through the end of the month completed the attitude scale. Those students who regularly attended class completed the attitude scale, interview and video products. The while the number of results was limited, the purposeful sample responded positively to the project.

The actual impact of this project on students was difficult to measure partially due to the limited amount of time allocated for data collection. Due to time constraints, the data could only be collected from one class. Inclement weather also impacted the course itself, student attendance, and data collection. A longer study may be more effective at collecting data from a larger sample. Generalizability was limited to at-risk, over-aged students who had fallen behind several grade levels over time and completed the Genre Writing course.

**Implications for Practice**

When considering implications for future practice, I must seriously consider both the findings and limitations. In the near future, I am planning on teaching another video documentary class combined with Genre Writing outside of project month. The Genre Writing teacher and I will teach the course in a double block during a three-month trimester. We will target students who are new to Genre Writing as well as student who have already taken and struggled with the course. During the pilot of this documentary project, my partner and I front-loaded the writing instruction and exercises at the beginning of the term. Next time, we will make sure that the video documentary portion is better integrated throughout the term in an effort increase student engagement.

**Implications for Further Study**

 This project would benefit from a longer study with many more subjects. It is still unclear if there is a link between student effort and presenting to a public audience. I might also consider a larger sample across multiple schools, to see if results are generalizable across a broader population.

**Conclusion**

The video documentary was a simple remedy for a complicated problem of reaching our students. While it is not the definitive solution for engaging and empowering at-risk youth, it did show some promise. The students who stuck with the project reacted positively towards it. Questions I now have include: what can I do in my practice to get more students to complete the course? Also, how do I continue to increase engagement? I look forward to using the lessons learned from this project to improve my course and reach more students. **Definition of Terms**

**Competency-Based Education** - A flexible, personalized educational structure that is focused on the mastery and demonstration of skills and academic content, regardless of seat time, pace and location.  The flexibility of this system allows educators to tailor materials to students’ needs It also allows students to move at their own pace (US Department of Education, n.d.).

**Idea Units** – The smallest unit of ideas shared during the video documentary projects. These units were used to measure how frequently and thoroughly a topic was covered in the videos. Units vary in size from a single word to a sentence.

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**Appendix A - Documentary Impact Attitude Scale**

The purpose of this study is to collect data for a research project about the attitudes of students at *School X* on the new documentary project. This study is important because the data will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the project and other new programs at the school. The survey is anonymous and voluntary. There will be no identifying information in the form. No risks or discomforts are anticipated. You do not have to answer any question that you do not wish to. By clicking “Start the Survey”, you are agreeing that:

* You have read this consent notice (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
* You have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
* You understand Bridgewater State University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
* You are 18 years of age or older
* Your participation in this research is completely voluntary
* Your may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

*Please read the statements below carefully and find the answer that most closely matches your opinion.*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Connection to School** | 1. **My classmates and teachers throughout the creation of this project did not understand or acknowledge my feelings.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **My documentary project did not allow me to express my feelings.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **Faculty and staff at my school understand how my home life impacts my attendance and progress.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **I am more likely to attend school community events after completing and sharing this project.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **My teacher does not care about my life outside of school.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **My classmates and I got to know each other personally as a result of this project.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree |
| **Engagement in Curriculum** | 1. **I feel more engaged in this class than in other Humanities classes.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **I did not feel personally connected to what we are doing in class.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **I enjoyed the documentary creating process.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **I found this class boring.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **I hate writing.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **Overall, I found this course engaging.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree***Open ended Questions***1. **What did you enjoy most about the class?**
2. **What did you find most valuable in learning in this class?**
3. **What could be improved in this class?**
 |
| Effort and Empowerment in Creating Positive Change | 1. **Opening up about my personal story is difficult.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **I believe that I can make a change in my community.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **I am proud of the video that I’ve created in this project.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **I am proud of the writing that I’ve completed in this project.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **I believe that my story matters.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **My story is private and should not be shared.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **Others do not want to hear my story.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **I do not believe my documentary will make a difference in creating change in the community or world.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree |
| Effort and Presenting Projects to the Public | 1. **I worked hard on the quality of this project.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **Knowing that a large audience would see my work did not make me work any harder.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **Receiving feedback from the audience I presented to was not important to me.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree1. **It was important to me that my documentary was viewed by a lot of people.**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree |

**Appendix B - Student Group Interview Questions**

Responses to group interview questions will be sorted into four areas: Connection to School, Engagement in Curriculum, Empowerment in Creating Positive Change, Effort and Presenting Projects to the Public.

**Connection to School**

* Did you feel personally connected to other participants in this project? Explain.
* Has your connection to school changed in any way as a result of this project?

**Engagement in Curriculum**

* Overall, how interested and engaged did you feel in this project?
* Did this class differ from the other classes that you’ve taken at our school? If so, how?
* Describe your successes and challenges in this project.

**Empowerment in Creating Positive Change**

* What do you think you will take away from this documentary project?
* What, if any, skills/knowledge gained do you expect you will use the most in the next three years?
* Do you believe that you can make a change in the world by speaking out about an issue? Explain.
* How did you feel about telling your story at the beginning of the project?
* How do you feel about the project now that it is done and has been seen by others?

**Effort and Going Public**

* If you knew up front that your teacher would be the only one to see your project, would that have made any difference in how it turned out? If so, how?
* Did you keep your audience in mind when creating your documentaries? Explain.
1. ##  Telling My Own Story: Digital Storytelling Curriculum - http://youthvoices.adobe.com/community/resources/4fc569718d536267ea00013b

 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)