

Inspiring Students through Digital Media Teleschool Teacher, Hawaii Schools Digital Media Program

–Irene Yamashita



Sixth grade students Daisylee Carinio and Trishia Carinio produce stories for school news program, “Inside Kapunahala.”

It’s 2:00 in the afternoon and sixth graders are starting to pile into a tiny classroom that was once used as a storage closet. Crowding around the table, student producers take out log sheets, scripts, and HI8 videotapes. VCRs, audio cassette and CD players, microphones, headphones, television monitors, graphic titlers, controllers, and bulky 3/4 “ UMATIC tape decks are stacked along the wall.

I am describing the setup of a well-equipped video-editing program at my elementary school back in 1990. The equipment performed like a workhorse. At the time, I wouldn’t have dared consider going back to editing with two VCR’s in Betamax format!

Now, let’s fast-forward ten years and look at the current editing system, which consists of Macintosh computers and digital equipment. Along the walls of the tiny classroom, various plaques and trophies pay tribute to award-winning student productions. Who would have thought back in 1990

that our elementary school video program would receive these local and national accolades?

How did we succeed in winning these awards? By implementing a program that is geared to success and providing opportunities for students to create quality projects—projects that foster success, possess built-in rewards, and create a sense of real accomplishment. Video is a powerful tool, and it can be used to motivate student achievement and learning. One of the greatest advantages in getting students to work with digital media is that they can retake and re-edit a project until they are satisfied with it. Students become very occupied in applying what they have learned by producing mini-documentaries, commercials, public service announcements, news stories, and informational presentations. Students learn to succeed by learning from other students’ successes. They view exemplary projects produced by their predecessors, and they learn from these projects

how to produce a quality product themselves. In addition, students follow a video assessment rubric designed to help them meet and exceed the Hawai'i performance and content standards in video production, language arts, social studies, and technology.

How does one build a successful video program? You have to be a risk taker and learn to think outside of the box. When I first started teaching video production, I didn't feel confident that I could do the job because I lacked experience in this area. I remember being nervous on the first day of school and taking my video-8 camcorder to interview kids as they arrived in the morning. Roaming the corridors with a camera in one hand and a microphone in the other, I introduced myself as the new video teacher. I asked them to tell me what they did over the summer and how they felt about starting a new school year. By the end of the day, I realized how much fun I had had interviewing students on camera. It was then I realized teaching video production was my calling. My principal, Ruby Hiraishi, hired me to be the half-time oral communication/video teacher. She was very supportive of my work, and she is the one who taught me to be a risk-taker.

The second key to success is to develop a support system. I started taking television production classes at Leeward Community College and video production training at 'Olelo, a public access T.V. station. As I began to meet other professionals in the field and other teachers who taught video production I began to build a network for technical support. I also met Esther Figurora, a veteran video producer and the person responsible for organizing the Hawai'i Video Curriculum Association. I became involved in this association and through this, I met other professionals, thereby expanding my support group.

In the mid-90's, my video program took another step forward when I met Bev Lum, a former media teacher who is now a friend. She opened my eyes to teaching media literacy. I began to understand the power of mass media in shaping the ways that we perceive ourselves and other people, and in creating images of our world. Bev helped me to see how media literacy could be integrated into a video curriculum in which the production component became the end product.

The key element to a successful video program—what makes it unique and innovative—is to promote thinking “outside the box.” It's important to allow space for fresh perspectives, especially in encouraging students to be creative in telling their stories. For example, “Inside Kapunahala,”

our school news program, showcases stories told from the student's point of view. Interviews, public service announcements, parodies, and skits are featured as a way of sharing school activities.

Working with the special education, regular education, and English as a second language students provides opportunities for all students to shine and share their talents. Quite often, students who were remedial readers became my star reporters. They blossomed with the opportunity to explore new media and demonstrated that they were able to speak on camera with confidence. Such experiences are rewarding for students, especially when their peers witness their performance on the school's closed circuit television.

One of the activities that I enjoy most as a teacher is working with students on mini-documentaries such as their History Day projects. History Day projects cover a wide range of topics. A study of the Hawaiian monarchy involved the students in doing biographical research on King Kamehameha, King Kalākaua, and Queen Lili'uokalani. Other mini-documentaries engaged the students in studies of the life and work of Father Damien, the history of cloning, the history of the Silk Road in China, the story of the Okinawan migration to Hawai'i, the life of Elison Onizuka, and the Holocaust. What I find rewarding is the depth of the research that student engage in when they set about creating a documentary. The elementary students in my media studies program experienced the process of researching primary and secondary resources by going to the State Archives and the Bishop Museum to videotape photographs, journals, and old newspaper articles. They learned to ask pertinent questions by interviewing experts in the field. From their research, they gained a greater awareness of how events in the past can affect life in the present. They discovered how to use catalogues to find relevant documents, they gained experience in analyzing data, and they learned to relate their new knowledge to the world they live in. The processes of research and discovery enabled students to become experts on their topics, and by developing documentaries on their topics they were able to share their discoveries with others.

One of my former students, Alexis Keene, reflected on her History Day experience when she was in the sixth grade.

“For a 12 year old, making a video is not something you get the chance to do often. So I jumped at the chance to work with Mrs. Yamashita to produce a 10 minute documentary about the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy

for a History Day competition. Being behind the camera is not something a 6th grader thinks about. Instead, I wanted to be in front of the camera.

As I dove into the books and looked through all the old pictures of the Hawaiian Monarchy, not only was I excited to learn more about my subject, but I was fascinated with the world of media literacy and the most visual way to tell a story. We did everything that making a documentary demands from researching to script writing, revising, taping, interviewing, editing, and even presenting our documentary to an audience. From a shy little girl I grew into a mature adolescent. I learned how to make my own appointments, request artifacts from the archives, search for books in the library, and interview people I didn't know. For me, the whole process was life changing.

While telling someone else's story I was also telling my own story. A story of six months of my life condensed into 10 minutes. The greatest feeling I had was finding my passion, something that I enjoyed doing and something that other's enjoy watching. Producing a film was the most fulfilling experience of my life. I fell in love with telling a story through video production.

From that point on, my life goal is to be able to produce films that millions of people could enjoy and I'm only starting to live my dream. For the next 4 years, I'll be attending the Art Institute of Portland, majoring in digital media production. I have full confidence in myself because I know how much I want this. I'll never forget where it all began and the very moment we presented the final version of "The Overthrow of Hawai'i's Last Ruling Monarch, Queen Lili'uokalani."

— Alexis Keene 2004.

During the time that Alexis was my student, I felt blessed to be her mentor. She blossomed, and this experience ignited her passion to become a documentary filmmaker. It is one of the wonderful, intrinsic rewards of teaching to learn of the impact that one can have on one's students.

Other students who have worked on History Day projects have shared similar experiences. Another student produced a mini-documentary on Hawai'i's last king, David Kalākaua. Her video made it through the state finals and was selected to compete at National History Day at the University of Maryland at College Park. The experience was enormously empowering for her. Her world suddenly expanded beyond Hawai'i, and she was able to embrace visions of leaving the islands to attend college elsewhere. The experience planted the seeds of change, and she matured into a confident, outgoing student during her high school years. She became the editor of the yearbook and school newspaper. She is now fulfilling her dream in studying journalism at Oregon State University.

Success stories such as these reinforce my love for teaching and the work that I do as a video teacher. Nothing satisfies me more than knowing that I contributed in some small way to my students' choices. Such memories make us resilient in life and contribute to our sense of commitment. I always remind myself that the small things I do may have a big impact on other people. As educators, we can make a difference in the lives we touch.