

‘Making Reel History’: Making History Real How a History Documentary Assignment Can Facilitate Third Level History Students in Their Study of the Past, While Equipping Them with a Multiplicity of Transferrable Skills

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Abstract

When treated to a private screening of D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation at the White House in 1915 US President Woodrow Wilson is reported to have acknowledged ‘the possibility to write history through the projector.’ Yet in spite of the profusion of historical films and documentaries produced globally up to the end of the twentieth century academic historians have been reluctant to engage with the medium of film in teaching their students about the past. To Robert A. Rosenstone, Professor Emeritus of History at the California Institute of Technology the film-maker is as much a historian as the university academic. Whilst concurring with Rosenstone on this point, I would add that the historian or future historian may also be a filmmaker. It is from this perspective that this paper will demonstrate how a third year undergraduate tutorial assignment undertaken by students at the University of Limerick in Ireland at once facilitated their knowledge about the past, while also equipping them with a multiplicity of transferrable skills that go beyond the realm of history and of academia itself.

A cohort of ninety students worked in pairs where each pairing had to produce a five minute narrated film-clip pertaining to specific episodes, individuals or themes related to twentieth century European history. An accompanying script had also to be produced in typed format. Both the script and the film-clip had to be thoroughly referenced. To further enhance the task, students were taught to add ‘quick response codes’ (QR codes) to their scripts. This enabled the lecturer/tutor to access the film clip via a smartphone app. The pioneering exercise was developed for a number of reasons. The primary aim of the endeavour was to produce greater student engagement with their subject. In this way it was essential that the students could connect with their learning through a familiar medium. The exercise was further propelled by an acknowledgement of the effectiveness of peer learning. A good deal of the new knowledge and skills which these students acquired originated from the brainstorming and laboratory sessions which were held during the semester. This initiative which was the first of its kind to be carried out by the University of Limerick’s History Department was also of tremendous benefit to those teaching the module; the lecturer and tutors who also gained new technical skills during the filmmaking workshops. The technical expertise was supplied by a teaching technologist employed by the university.

Introduction

This paper is the result of a third year undergraduate tutorial assignment undertaken by History students at the University of Limerick in Ireland in the spring semester of 2015. As part of their overall coursework, students working in pairs had to produce a five minute documentary film based on specific aspects of their twentieth century history module. A primary aim in devising this particular assignment was to make the module more interesting for students. I also wished to delegate more responsibility to the students thus allowing them a greater sense of authorship throughout the learning process. Another objective was to ensure a greater degree of student engagement in the module through the use of more contemporary media, in this case film.

As far back as 1898 the Polish cinematographer Boleslaw Matuszewski declared film to be a ‘new historical source.’ Some fifty years later the British historian George Kitson Clark while helping to establish the British Universities Film Council noted that one of the objectives of the Council would be to promote the use of film in the realm of higher education. A similar aim was professed by the *Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Films* in Göttingen a year later, and by the *Referat für zeitgeschichtliche Filmforschung und Filmdokumentation* in 1953 [1].

With this assignment I wanted to take things a step further by facilitating students in making their own short film documentaries from a list of suggested research topics. This model of teaching history was inspired as much by the prevalence of multimedia devices already being utilised by students in their everyday lives, as by the evident disenchantment among them towards the more traditional structure of history tutorials. This paper shall detail the various stages involved in the creation of this tutorial assignment, beginning with its genesis as an idea and the development of the criteria for assessment.

I then discuss the process of instruction up to the submission and presentation of the material by students. I finally assess the learning outcomes and the potential for similar applications in the future.

1. An Innovation in History Teaching at Third Level

According to Haydn more than two thirds of students in England and Wales drop out of studying history at second level 'at the first opportunity' [2]. This is against the backdrop of the growing recognition in third level institutions across Europe of the importance of developing and improving 'the quality of teaching and learning' as outlined in the *Report to the European Commission on Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions* which was published in 2013 [3]. Writing as someone who has taught History at both second and third level I am well aware of the great potential for improvement and innovation in this area. There exists a great many opportunities whereby the old template that has served the teaching of history at third level may be transformed into something far more exciting and inclusive in terms of student participation and engagement. The importance of fostering student engagement is something which has long been recognised in primary and secondary institutions of learning, but I would argue that this is not in evidence to the same degree at third level. The educational experience for undergraduate students of history at third level is typically one where the student is often just a passive recipient of information. Attendance at lectures can be arbitrary. Assignments are often solitary tasks and are almost exclusively based on the completion of a written paper with perhaps a presentation and an end of term exam. This format is extremely limiting in its scope and its utility and is furthermore counter-productive to the students' overall educational experience.

Writing on the teaching of history at second level Richard Jones-Nordic notes how 'the model of history teaching, in which the history pupil is treated as a trainee historian, needs to be overhauled [4]. However while students of history at third level develop writing and research skills it is important also that the process whereby such skills are acquired is made interesting and enjoyable. It is with this in mind that I devised this particular assignment which it was envisaged would increase student engagement, facilitate pair and group work, while equipping students with a multiplicity of transferrable skills.

The OECD in its 2001 report 'Learning to Change' puts forward the pedagogical rationale for the use of ICT in teaching and learning [5]. Although the report refers in the main to the area of primary and second level education, one cannot overlook the very real need for such an approach in terms of third level and most especially in the teaching of history. In addition to these considerations, getting history students to work with film will inspire a greater appreciation of the discipline and of the different ways by which one may engage with the past. The American director Ken Burns whose historical documentaries include *The Civil War* among a host of others, and who has been responsible for igniting a renewed interest in the discipline of history among young and old alike, has been critical of the exclusory attitude displayed by traditional practitioners of academic history towards film as a means of engaging with the past [6]. According to Burns academia's tendency of 'communicating only with itself' has alienated scores of potential scholars from engaging with the discipline [7]. The emerging realm of public history is an important area of historical practice that benefits from the use of film [8]. Robert A. Rosenstone has described film as the 'chief conveyor of public history in our culture' [8]. Therefore the contribution made by popular historians such as Ken Burns should be acknowledged by academics and not simply ignored [9]. My decision therefore to include this documentary filmmaking task as part of my students' overall coursework, was in some way influenced by my desire to bridge this gap between academic and popular approaches to history.

1. The Assignment

The ninety students in this third year undergraduate class had easy access to an array of archival material online and on film. As part of the structure of the assignment the students had to work in pairs. Each pairing had to produce a five minute documentary clip with an accompanying script which had to correspond exactly to the narration used in the film. Both had to be referenced in accordance with the University of Limerick's referencing standards, and all visual and sound sources used on the clip had to be clearly credited. I conveyed to students that if the film clip produced did not meet the referencing criteria then it would not be possible to show it in class or to upload the finished product onto Sulis which is the University of Limerick's collaborative online learning site, jointly supported by the university's Centre for Teaching and Learning and its Information and Technology Division (ITD). Sulis is used for blended learning activities such as this one, and is useful in terms of student assessment and feedback. The emphasis on proper referencing of the film clip made students realise the importance of good practice in this area. Knowing that their work would not just be viewed in private by their tutor but available to the wider world also, made students give greater consideration to

how and from where they would source their research material than if they were producing a standalone written text.

While a number of students were coming to this task with a stated interest in modern European history, a certain cohort indicated a dearth of technical knowhow in terms of producing and editing a film clip. To get around this problem I decided to dedicate two ICT workshops per tutorial group to the production of the film clip. Both workshops were delivered by the university's educational technologist and e-learning expert Robert Hutchison. During the first week of tutorials students attended an introductory ICT workshop where they were provided with the basic tools and knowledge on making a film clip using *Microsoft Movie Maker*. A written version of the workshop instructions was made available and posted on Sulis, where a discussion forum was also opened to allow students to post questions relating to their task. My role in the workshop was to assist students experiencing difficulties with particular aspects of the assignment and to outline the learning objectives associated with this particular task, as well as explaining the submission process. A second workshop was arranged for week 6 of the semester to troubleshoot any problems encountered by students and to share ideas and experiences. In this second workshop students were taught how to add 'quick response codes' (QR codes) to their scripts prior to their submission on Sulis. Once completed all film clips had to be submitted along with the written scripts via a Dropbox facility on Sulis. These codes could then be accessed by tutors ahead of the tutorial class in which they would be played. The pair of students responsible for each documentary clip would then have to answer questions from both peers and tutors, both on the content of their work, their research methods and their overall methodology.

2. A Complete Learning Experience

This undertaking was as much a learning experience for me as it was for my students. In terms of preparing myself for the technical aspect of this module I attended a couple of preparatory workshops in advance of the module. In this way I could empathise with my students' learning experience, and this was a tremendous benefit in terms of my engagement with them throughout the module. While a number of students were most certainly novices in terms of filmmaking and editing, some students displayed an advanced level of expertise in this area. One of the most satisfying developments which resulted from this task was to witness just how much students were learning from one another.

Students and especially third level students of which an increasing number comprises mature students possess a variety of skills and a diversity of knowledge which they are eager to share with their peers. In this way the task became as much a group experience which involves a considerable degree of peer learning and one in which the tutor is also benefitting from the knowledge being shared. Another important advantage of group work and peer learning activities is that they facilitate the development of skills and learning that are demanded by employers in the professional world [10]. Through working together students learn from one another, build self-confidence by learning that they themselves have knowledge or input which is valued. They can better understand complex problems through discussion and explanation. Communication skills are developed and students also learn how to work as part of a team. In this particular film documentary task students were able to deploy and develop a range of intelligences from interpersonal to intrapersonal, audio, visual, literary and performance [11]. While only a minority of students chose to perform in front of camera, all were involved in editing, narration and scriptwriting. The music chosen for the film clips was thoroughly researched and its relevance explained by students in their submissions. Students found matching the images (whether stills or moving images) to the script one of the more challenging aspects of the assignment. However this task involved a good degree of discussion between students and resulted in students engaging in problem solving and decision-making activities.

3. Assessment, Learning Outcomes and Feedback

While the learning objectives for this assignment were to enable students to research and produce a five minute documentary film, the assessment criteria had to take account of how they applied their ICT skills as well as taking into account their standard of academic research and writing. Five separate assessment categories were thus identified; (i) sources and referencing, which had to be stated on the film clip and on the written script, (ii) technique (film only), (iii) grammar, phraseology and content (script and film), (iv) argument and analysis (script only), (v) conforming to instructions (including submission of the completed work).

The reaction from students to this particular task from the outset was extremely encouraging. One student noted how 'this is a great idea. I wish we did stuff like this for every module.' This enthusiastic attitude was typical of the feedback received. The standard of the work completed made my students extremely proud of what they had achieved. Furthermore it was easily demonstrated how much the students themselves had learned from their assignment both in terms of its technical and academic

aspects. By engaging students in this way we as teachers and educational facilitators in history not only enrich our own teaching experience as we not only help to connect our students with their past, but also equip them with a multiplicity of transferrable skills by employing the technology and learning techniques of the future.

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