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Our Film Festival

When we first introduced the idea of a film festival, immediate visions of glitz and glam sprang to the minds of the students sitting in front of us. Their eyes glazed over as they stared into space, imagining what it might be like to be a part of the “Hollywood experience”; from the beginning, they were in. Initially, the draw of fame and recognition motivated them, but soon, they found a different motivation, that of the stories they were planning to share. Since the early days of filmmaking, the idea of telling stories using images has fascinated the public, and these students were no different. Because the medium of film combines sight and sound, ideas that are found only in one’s imagination can be brought to life when they are placed on the written page, enacted, and recorded on videotape.

The festival itself has grown and changed over the years since 2008, but a few of the original goals we made during that first year still hold true:

- We don’t run it as a competition, but rather as a celebration of student achievement where we provide a venue to showcase student work for an authentic audience.
- We focus on curriculum and making the tie between video projects and academics.
- We provide ongoing support to students and teachers as they create their films.
- We make kids feel like rock stars.

A Brief History of Film Festivals

Since the first recorded film festival in Venice in 1932, artists have been searching for venues to share their stories, ideas, and techniques with others in the industry. As Kenneth Turan points out in his book, *Sundance to Sarajevo: Film Festivals and the World They Made*, the number of film festivals continues to grow worldwide, pointing to a variety of cultural trends. There are a host of active independent filmmakers who “hunger for appreciative audiences, a need that dovetails nicely with audience members’ yearning for alternatives to the standard Hollywood fare that dominates film screens not only in this country but also worldwide” (Turan, 2002, p. 7). These same principles hold true for student film festivals that are popping up

in schools everywhere. In many cases, the students who sit in our classrooms have already been working with video in one form or another and would like to share their stories with a receptive audience, just as professional filmmakers and distributors are seeking an audience. Students push their movies out on YouTube channels and share them with their friends, but in few cases do they have the opportunity to showcase their stories to a guaranteed audience as part of a physical venue. The event itself becomes the culminating project and the platform for sharing stories and taking pride in their work.

So, what exactly is a film festival? Truly, each festival looks different, depending on its purpose, but on the outside, it's simply a showcase of films running in some kind of sequence over a set period of time and in a common location. On the inside, however, each film festival has a life of its own based on the motivation and planning that go into it. In some cases, the recognition of winning an award becomes the focus, while in others the celebration of the medium of film and the craft of telling a story take center stage. Regardless of these motivational elements, the electricity and excitement that come with a festival can be exhilarating for filmmakers and audiences alike.

In the pages that follow, we will walk through our history with the creation of a film festival in our district, outlining how and why we attempted it, as well as tips and tricks that might help other districts embark on the same type of project. In our district the festival has become part of the culture. It is something that teachers and students look forward to each year, uniting the district through story and bridging grade levels to encompass and showcase the learning that goes on every day in our classrooms. The festival is a catalyst of innovation and pushes teachers and students to be creators of digital content and savvy media consumers simply through their participation. It is our hope that other teachers will be inspired to plan digital film festivals and that this book will ease your journeys of celebrating student work.

What You'll Find in This Book

This book is written not only to give you the process and procedures for creating a film festival, but also to provide some reasoning behind our methods and procedures. We also explain why and how video can be a dynamic, rewarding tool in all classrooms.

In Chapter 1, *Today's Students, Today's Media*, we address the changes that have occurred in our culture due to the rapid expansion of technology and the

accessibility that we now have to tools that allow anyone to create stories. This chapter also looks at our information usage patterns as we have moved from consuming the media that surrounds us to being participants in the creation of that media.

Chapter 2, *Education through a Digital Lens*, focuses on the role of media in education. In this chapter we specifically address the need for media literacy and fluency to be included in curricular offerings for students, as well as offer some examples of student projects that show how filmmaking and video can be incorporated into the classroom.

Chapter 3, *Festival Planning*, discusses our ideas for the film festival and how they evolved over time. This chapter provides an in-depth look at the planning process for the festival itself, including the need for a mission statement and our recognition of the importance of gaining support from our colleagues as partners and from members of the community as sponsors. Chapter 3 also describes the valuable lessons we learned about planning our festival from attending the AHA! Film Festival in Effingham, Illinois, and meeting with its organizers.

In our fourth chapter, *Working with Teachers*, we begin to get into the creation process and describe the support we offered to teachers as the film festival began to take shape. This included (and continues to include for subsequent festival years) professional development classes, resources, and continued instructional and technical support that have been crucial to the festival's success. Chapter 4 also highlights the new conversations that we were able to have with teachers around the use of video creation as a viable and worthwhile activity.

In Chapter 5, *Guidelines for Planning, Considerations for Equipment*, we describe some possible student projects, discuss some of the equipment we used to make the films, and outline the guidelines set for participation in the festival. By defining procedures and guidelines, we were better able to streamline the process and make the creation process more accessible to teachers and students.

As you might guess, a district film festival could be a logistical nightmare without having a solid plan in place. Chapter 6, *Behind the Scenes*, serves as a guide for much of the work that was done to create the festival. This chapter describes our instructional technology team's work on the films to create the final experience. Each team member's responsibilities are defined at the outset of the project. Also included in this chapter are discussions of the technical side of the system we created and used for the virtual festival, the submission process, and information management using a database.

Chapter 7, Event Planners: Two Handy Checklists, outlines, month by month, what we determined should be done or considered in a checklist format that identifies steps in the planning process.

While this book is not about making movies specifically, we would be remiss if we didn't address the process we used to help teachers and students through the creative process. Chapter 8, Making Movies, focuses on the creation process and walks readers through the preproduction, production, and postproduction cycles with tips and tricks for managing these types of projects in a classroom.

As is often the case, a question we are frequently asked when encouraging teachers to take the time to create videos with students is, "How do I assess this project?" Chapter 9, Curriculum and Assessment, addresses just that with formative and summative assessment strategies and rubrics to make filmmaking a feasible project for techie and non-techie teachers.

The culminating event for the film festival is the actual night when kids dress up, the red carpet is rolled out, and students are honored. Chapter 10, On the Red Carpet, brings everything together for the actual night of the event. We define each team member's tasks; as they all have fulfilled their responsibilities, participants can enjoy the evening without being aware of the painstaking work the team has done behind the scenes. This chapter outlines some considerations when planning and orchestrating the end result.

The final chapter, After the Lights Come Up, is a reflection on what was learned through the process of creating our film festival. During the planning and execution of the early festivals, not everything went smoothly. However, over the years, we have been able to adapt and create a better experience for the students and teachers in our district. In Chapter 11, we discuss how we have streamlined the process to honor more students and to make video a more integral part of our district's culture.

Today's Students

Students today think in different ways from their counterparts a generation ago. Today's students process information differently. They've never known a world without technology and the Internet. Cell phones have been a part of everyday life for most of our students almost since they were born. The ways they access and work with information differ drastically from students who started school just fifteen years ago. Encyclopedias and phone books have been replaced by websites; specific facts about any topic can be accessed from mobile devices regardless of one's location. In a world with instant access, the connections young people make in today's culture can be more significant to themselves and to the world than ever before. A word "spoken" online can be heard and acted upon on the other side of the world. Teachers are no longer the sole purveyors of information. With a few mouse clicks, students can access the facts that composed the bulk of our curricula in the past. The 2010 National Educational Technology Plan (NETP), *Transforming American Education: Learning Powered by Technology*, recognizes the adaptations that students have found.

Many students' lives today are filled with technology that gives them mobile access to information and resources 24/7, enables them to create multimedia content and share it with the world, and allows them to participate in online social networks where people from all over the world share ideas, collaborate, and learn new things. Outside school, students are free to pursue their passions in their own way and at their own pace. The opportunities are limitless, borderless, and instantaneous. (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. x)

No longer can we deny or ignore this trend in educational circles. Information has changed. Our world has changed. Through this change, each generation of students has been watching—watching struggles and watching successes. With these world-wide changes in communication, students respond to their surroundings in different ways, and our world, in turn, is changing in response to our students. These changes have presented great opportunities for students to share their stories with the world. Every single student who enters a classroom has a story to tell. Some students are anxious to share, while others feel trepidation, yet every story is a powerful commentary on that student's life and experiences. The opportunities to create and share have never been greater.

Traditionally, through lectures and textbooks, content was learned by students, and, depending on how well they were able to recall that information for an assessment, students received grades, compartmentalized that content, and the teacher moved on to deliver the content of the next unit. Until fairly recently, for most of their schooling, our students have been passive consumers of information. Their teachers told them everything they needed to know. By and large, students were not given the opportunity to derive their own meanings from information and to form their own connections.

Now, we are moving into an era of asking our students to do less consuming and more creating: creating new meanings and connections, new stories told in a variety of ways, new types of content shared with classmates that, in turn, become instructional resources for learning. Then, as students begin to create more of their own content, their consuming patterns begin to change. They begin to look at content in a different light. They seek out connections and begin to make efforts toward shaping and understanding their world rather than allowing the world to shape them.

One of the challenges of this newfound freedom to create content is trying to figure out where and how the culture of participation fits into the more traditional role of education. Worksheets, essays, and internal projects that never see light outside the four walls of a classroom are not as motivating as creating one's own content in a world where self-publishing and online video exist. It's no longer enough for student-created stories to be shared with a teacher or classmates because students expect their work to be posted for others to see and, possibly, to connect with and comment on.

Feedback on students' essays isn't measured only by the teacher's critiques and grades; it's measured in seconds and minutes until an RSS feed updates and students read what their peers and teacher have to say about their ideas. So, does that mean that there is no place for consumption? Absolutely not, it just looks different now. There's a balance that must be struck between creating and consuming as one informs and influences the other. Through the use of video, students can begin to see themselves as creators as well as consumers, and we teachers can begin to help students strike that balance in their own lives.

I am a big fan of the Parkway Digital Film Festival because I can see how it sparks creativity and love of learning in my kids. They have been so excited to research, write, and work as part of a team. Using video has given them a way to showcase their ideas and learning.