Where Visual Literacy and Identity Meet: Adolescents Define Themselves Through Participation in a University Video and Art Enrichment Program

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Keywords
reading, art education, visual literacy, identity

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Where Visual Literacy and Identity Meet: Adolescents Define Themselves Through Participation in a University Video and Art Enrichment Program
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Abstract
This article summarizes a project that oriented one hundred and twenty-five gifted and talented middle-school students to university culture through a series of summer workshops that emphasized visual media. Various workshops introduced students to methods of video and art production. The middle-school students created short videos and artistic collages to represent their identity in response to two activities: (a) in-depth explorations of the California State University campus at San Bernardino; and (b) literary reading. Art and video production are revealed as a powerful means of middle-school students’ identity formation and expression; the work summarized herein gains credence through its alignment with seminal work in the field of visual literacy theory and research.

Introduction

Middle-school students are often seen as challenging to work with by professionals in the field of education. Even those who are academically successful can often be perceived as seething with hormones, conflicted by personal relationships, and fragmented by divergent interests and preoccupations. So when the students involved in this summer enrichment academy became intensely focused in the visually-based workshops designed to expose them to a university culture, and define identity in that context, the results seemed worth sharing. The one hundred and twenty-five gifted and talented middle-school students who participated in two-week summer workshops are enrolled in seven GEAR UP middle schools in Southern California. GEAR UP (Gaining Early Access and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) is a federal initiative program that supports academic development and a college-going culture in middle-school students. The work featured in this article grows out of the partnership between California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) and seven schools in three particular underperforming school districts. Considered part of what is termed the Inland Empire, San Bernardino school districts have very high numbers of school contexts challenged by poverty and low Academic Performance Index scores. GUIE – Gear Up Inland Empire – refers specifically to the partnership between CSUSB and the three middle schools that sent one hundred and twenty-five of their gifted students to campus for summer workshops on talent development and university preparation. This cohort of eighth-grade students receives enrichment services and their teachers participate in professional development at CSUSB at
the graduate level for infusing project-based learning and higher-order thinking skills within their school curriculum. The visual literacy emphasis of the GUIE summer enrichment workshops offers a powerful model for development of middle-school students’ identity in the context of literary reading and video production activities. The literature on visual literacy is vast. The projects on literary reading and video production that are summarized here are most closely associated with work that emphasizes, first of all, the central connection between visual thinking and almost all aspects of human intercourse (Arnheim, 1969, 1979; Berger, 1980; Gallas, 1994; Eisner, 1992; Gee, 1997; the New London Group, 1996; and Daley, 2003). Secondly, a fair amount of published work on the distinct relationship between literary reading and visual literacy stands in close kinship with the emphasis of this article (Sullivan, 2004; Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 2006; Claggett, 1992; Moline, 1995; Cecil, & Lauritzen, 1994; and O’Brien, 2001; New London Group, 1996). Thirdly, visual representation as a valid data source and means of expression is discussed in multiple venues; this work stands in support of that reported here as well (Flood, Heath & Lapp, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The GUIE Summer Enrichment Academy was designed around four broad goals:

1. Project-based learning that emphasized [a] critical thinking; [b] problem solving, and [c] creativity;
2. Relationships with [a] faculty, [b] teacher-mentors from the three district middle-schools involved in the project, and [c] other talented students from the three middle schools in the project;
3. Familiarity with the CSUSB campus, atmosphere, facilities and physical environment, and;

The goals are ordered above to suggest that the first three of them engender the most important one – that of enhanced self-awareness and identity exploration. So, as a result of (1) project-based learning and (2) relationships with key participants in the project, the middle-school students are led to (3) gain familiarity with a university campus. These three elements are the foundation for achieving the fourth goal – (4) the middle-school students’ exploration, development and enhanced of their self-identity. One of the intentions of the GEAR UP model is that middle-school students’ identity is at least somewhat shaped by a sense of themselves as prospective university graduates. All of the work undertaken by the GEAR UP initiative is shaped around the intention that middle-school student’s sense of self is reinforced toward the goal of becoming a university-educated citizen of society. Certainly, a big part of the GUIE summer project was structured to facilitate the student’s
exploration and enhancement of their self-identity through visual media exploration. Since the video production in which the students were involved was a central aspect of their one-week summer activities, that aspect of the program is described first.

**KidVid: Videography, Ethnography, and Self-Identity**

Two of the summer workshops addressed the goals of the GEAR UP Summer Enrichment Academy by featuring video production. In the *Introduction to Videography* workshop, middle-school students learned to use a variety of hardware and software products to produce videos expressing unique aspects of their identities. In another complementary workshop entitled *Videography, Sociology and Ethnography* the students explored the physical geography and facilities of the campus, and interviewed various university personnel; all of these explorations and interviews were videotaped. Thus the two workshops complemented one another in terms of their video emphasis and their address of the goals for the Academy. The project-based learning of the first workshop featured video production that depended on relationships among university faculty leading the workshops, as well as teacher mentors, various university personnel and the middle-school students themselves. Finally, the underlying fourth goal of the Summer Academy was the students’ exploration, development and enhancement of self-identity. Toward that end, each one of them produced a video that aligned specific elements of their self-identity with an aspect of the university culture. The methods through which the *Introduction to Videography* workshop met these goals will now be described in detail.

The *Introduction to Videography* workshop emphasized the technical process through which the students would use a video camera, employ shooting techniques, frame shots, and change camera angles for varied shots ranging from outdoor physical settings to indoor interviews of people. In addition to basic technical manipulation of the camera, students were introduced to the design process of storyboarding, sequencing of shots, and planning for balanced footage among indoor and outdoor shots and interviews. Finally, the workshop also included an emphasis on how to employ editing software and apply it to achieve a coherent final product. Each student produced a one-minute video that represented his or her own personal exploration of the campus and interviews with campus faculty and support staff. The students did indeed become video designers, producers, directors, and stars – a tall order given the seven-day framework for the GEAR UP Summer Enrichment Academy (SEA). Their final one-minute film entailed a complete production process including a storyboard, script, live footage, B-roll, narration, music, sound effects, still images, animated graphics, video effects, an introduction, and credits!

The *Introduction to Videography* workshop forwarded the goals of the SEA by engaging the middle-school students in a video production project entailing the cooperation of workshop leaders, teacher mentors, and university faculty. Perfectly suited to the GEAR UP mission and the SEA goals, the students produced their one-minute videos about their self-identities in relation to their
own explorations of the CSUSB campus. Each student was paired with one other student, allowing everyone to be both a live subject and a camera operator. Workshop time was allotted to provide whole-class instruction for pre-production set-up. This part of the process for each student’s one-minute film entailed guidance in how to conceive an original idea, do research, write a synopsis, choose a format and point-of-view, draw a storyboard, and write the dialogue for the script. Whole-class instruction was also dedicated to basic techniques for conceptualization, perspective taking, sequencing, analysis, editing, revision, synthesis, and evaluation. Individual workshop time was allotted for filming and post-production editing. In fact, the post-production time was extensive, entailing about two hours of post-production time for each final minute of video footage.

A key method used to teach the middle-school students in the Introduction to Videography workshop was called just-in-time teaching. Fundamentally, this approach involves providing an overview of the video-production process from beginning to end, then spot-teaching as need arises. Thus, once an overview of the basic introduction to pre-production, filming, and post-production was offered, students were offered one-on-one responses to specific technical and design needs “in-the-moment” as various demands arose for bringing their visual sketch of themselves to a final realization. This process depended on the assumption that middle-school students have a tacitly internalized lexicon of visual language processing that can be drawn on as they are guided to produce a semiotic structure of their identities through video. In presenting this workshop to the students, the assumption was that video production would be intrinsically motivating to the students as a vehicle for self-expression of identity relative to explorations of the CSUSB campus culture and environment.

Figure 1 shows students in the midst of collaborative post-production assembly of their video footage. They are working to produce a one-minute film depicting key elements of identity in relation to a university environment.
Figure 2 shows two students learning to experiment with the technical aspects of using a camera as they also plan for the footage they need to create their one-minute identity videos.

Adolescents’ Identity Development and Visual Literacy

Almost thirty years ago Erikson (1968) suggested that the formation of a strong and coherent sense of identity was the crucial developmental step associated with the transition from adolescence to adulthood. A fair amount of focus has been dedicated to the ways in which social factors affect adolescent identity (Marcia, 1980; Waterman 1985). These writers have paid close attention to how personal identity development is interwoven with social relatedness – that is, how identity development unfolds in terms of group identification and relationships in a particular social world. Leisure activities are an inherently important aspect of this network of social relatedness and identity formation. Luke and Elkins’ (1998) work in critical literacy suggests that the omnipresence of new media technologies holds enormous implications for teachers and professionals working with adolescents. Also, Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis (2001) report that seventy-three percent of teenagers use the Internet for various reasons; together these sources document the centrality of visually-based activity time absorbed by teenagers. Goodman’s (2003) work in New York City focuses specifically on how teachers there work with students to produce video documentaries; Goodman laments the disconnect that arises when education fails to recognize and incorporate the social and cultural contexts in which adolescents live their lives. This special book suggests a powerful connection between video production and adolescent identity development. Further, Daley (2003) argues that
the multi-media language of a visual screen (such as found in video) offers the opportunity to construct and interpret complex messages often not possible through print. The viewer/producer is afforded an opportunity to interact directly in a meaning-making construction. All of these discussions reinforce the work of the SEA. The middle-school student’s video constructions involved both the reading and interpretation of one’s own being and the writing and production of that vision of self and identity through video. Video production may be a perfect medium for the post-modern expression of adolescent identity, as it is fundamentally a multi-modal and multi-media dimensional creation of being. The work of the GUIE Summer Enrichment Academy rests on the established connections between adolescents’ identity development and their saturation in leisure activities involving the visual medium of video, among many other visually-based sources (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003; Moje, Willes, Fassio, 2001; Myers, Hemmett, McKillop, 2000). The ways in which the Videography, Sociology and Ethnography workshop furthered the work on identity exploration through video production will now be presented.

The Videography, Sociology and Ethnography workshop also depended on video production as a central part of this one-week workshop. Students videotaped their travels as they toured the campus and interviewed various people there. It was assumed that the students would have the best opportunity to appreciate the university campus if they could align it with aspects of their own personal needs. Thus, this course was structured to complement the GUIE goals for the Summer Academy by linking the students’ explorations of campus with elements of their own personal identity. As a way of beginning the workshop process, the students looked at six specific area of their needs that might be met at a university campus: physical, environmental, creative, social, emotional, and intellectual. These areas are derived from work by Dabrowski (1964) that looks at development of creativity in relation to areas of personality development.

On the first day of the Videography, Sociology and Ethnography workshop, each student wrote about him/herself from the perspective of each of the six areas of identity mentioned above. Once again, these six areas are: (i) physical, (ii) environmental, (iii) creative, (iv) social, (v) emotional, and (vi) intellectual. The workshop leader and teacher-mentor participated in this writing activity so that the students would see that the adults valued the writing and exploration process. Once writing time was complete, the students gathered in groups of three to share writing and to learn enough about one person within their triad to be able to introduce that person to the rest of the class. As the personal introductions took place, elements of each student’s personal identity (from among the six explored) were placed on six petals that surrounded the center of this flower. Once students and workshop leaders understood one another in terms of various needs that a campus culture might meet, larger petals were added to this visual sketch of a flower. The six smaller petals represented aspects of each middle-school student’s identity, and the six larger petals around the outside of the flower then depicted the various organizations and parts of a campus culture that might address each individual’s needs. For example, one smaller petal of the flower might depict an element of a
student’s physical self and might be seen with a larger petal under it that stood for the recreation center, the pool or perhaps the intra-mural sports team. The students each produced a visual sketch that showed a completed a twelve-petal flower. Six smaller petals were placed around the center of the flower for each unique aspect of their (i) physical, (ii) environmental, (iii) creative, (iv) social, (v) emotional, and (vi) intellectual identities. Six larger petals were placed around the outside of each of the inner petals to represent various parts of the university campus that might address the six elements of identity placed most closely around the center of each flower. The flower appeared on a white board every day of the seven days of the workshop and was the basis of each day’s planning and discussion. During each one of the remaining six days of the workshop, one after the other of each student's identity petals was the focus of the day. Day after day, planning time was used to decide on interviews of campus personnel and university facilities that might complement or address one particular aspect of the students’ physical, environmental, creative, social, emotional, and intellectual identity. In this way, a complete portrait of an identity flower was constructed with an inner layer of petals representing students’ identities, and an outer layer depicting a feature of the university that would address each of the six identity elements.

Figure 3 shows students obtaining footage of the recreation center; they moved from here to other campus spots that featured the sports and sports complexes.
Figure 4 shows a student (with peer colleagues in background) gathering footage in preparation for her video statement of self in alignment with the arts and social sciences facilities.

On almost all of the workshop days, a videographer accompanied the students around the campus as they moved to various locations and interviewed people. If they were focusing on creative aspects of self, they might explore the visual and performing arts facilities and interview staff and faculty members in those locations that could respond to questions about that part of a university campus. The video production process played an enormously important role in the students’ exploration of self in connection with the university. The consciousness that they were involved in actually producing a final and complete product seemed to deepen their sense of the work’s importance and value. The work of identity exploration relative to a university campus environment became vested with huge significance as it was joined to the video production process. The realization that other people would see their work caused the students to be very engaged in all aspects of this work. As a result of the many related phases of the Videography, Sociology and Ethnography workshop, the goals of the Gear Up Inland Empire, Summer Enrichment Academy were met.

On the final day of this workshop, students added another dimension of visual engagement to their work. Each one of them used various art media and cash register tape to create their own version of their identity flower. The cash register tape was folded into fans holding important words characterizing their experiences of the interviews and campus tours. Each student’s flower was thus a unique expression of their time at CSUSB. Through the video and art production process, students created a sense of themselves in direct connection with a university campus. Thus the specific overall goal of enhanced self-awareness and identity exploration was not only discussed but concretized in multiple ways from the students’ perspectives.

It is important to see this work not only as a fluidly successful method through which adolescents might evolve a vision of themselves as university-educated citizens but also in terms of how both the Videography, Sociology and Ethnography and Introduction to Videography workshops jibe with current trends in the field of sociocultural theories of literacy. Gee’s (1992; 1996; 1997), Wertch’s (1991), and Hugo’s (2000) approaches to how the mind is saturated in the brine of its cultural touchstones are prominent in this picture. Gee tells us that all engagements in the world are situated...
in a cultural and situational context. Becoming literate and establishing a secure sense of identity means engaging in the proliferation of visual media that forms the sociocultural landscape of the lives of adolescents. If, as teachers, we are not leading students through a critical realization and construction of themselves in light of the visual contours of their media-drenched lives, we are probably not touching on what matters most to them. Creating identity through video production brought them into an entirely conscious awareness of the dimensions of their psyches. Over the past five years the Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy has published dozens of articles espousing the value of engaging adolescents in the primary symbols of their worlds – this often entails the semiotics of visual literacy (Alvermann, 2001; Moje, Young, Readance & Moore, 2000; & Luke & Elkins, 1998; Luke 2002; Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000).

Summary

The GEAR-UP Summer Enrichment Academy was structured to help one hundred and twenty five gifted middle-school students engage in visually based activities that would help them explore aspects of their identity. The Gear Up goal is that these students will refine elements of identity relative to a view of themselves as university attendees and graduates. The visually-based acts of video and art production were of fundamentally central importance to the process of identity formation that was forwarded through the visual literacy workshops. The visual dimensions of the workshops became the semiotic vehicle through which and with which the students were able to construct and refine identity in light of their explorations of the CSUSB campus. The visual literacy acts of video and art production were a vehicle that carried the students into an affective and critical consciousness of themselves as socioculturally centered beings relative to their current and future identities as university-going members of society. This works rests within the context of much recent research that looks at how adolescents might refine literacy, and explore identity in a context designed to respect the multimedia realities of their lives.

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