

Teacher Reflection on Tabletop Moviemaking in a Language Arts Classroom

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I recently received a wonderful reflection from a teacher who implemented Tabletop Moviemaking in her 9th grade Language Arts class. I helped support her on a couple of the days that involved the moviemaking, but she was really at the center of the delivery.

I was very impressed with her integration of the method with deconstructing a short story. Her project taught me two things: One, the method dovetails with the writing process and literature. Two, a great teacher will do amazing things. The second point is really what makes this implementation of Tabletop Moviemaking shine.

Below are her reflections on some questions I asked her, followed by several of her student films. Her students wrote, built, shot, and edited these movies.

How did you integrate Tabletop with Language Arts?

When I learned about Tabletop Moviemaking, I was immediately excited to try it in the upcoming school year. Because I wanted to carefully plan and coordinate the project regarding communication with Brick, ordering supplies, requesting cameras from our Technology department, and integrating the project meaningfully into my syllabus, I chose to do the Tabletop Moviemaking project late in the semester, giving me enough time to prepare.

I teach a course called Writing Workshop, and near the end of the semester the students read a murder mystery short story (Margaret Atwood's "Death by Landscape"). I felt a Tabletop Movie would be a perfect pre-writing activity before the students wrote a formal persuasive essay based on the story. Filming a movie about what students thought happened at the end of the story would get their creative juices flowing; they would have to explore the short story for evidence, familiarizing themselves with the text in an intimate way.

I planned for the project to take 7.5 class hours, and we finished right on schedule! I took the opportunity to teach screenwriting skills, literary concepts like setting, characterization, and plot, and moviemaking skills such as over-the-shoulder shot, panning the camera, and film editing.

In what ways does Tabletop Moviemaking promote/facilitate collaborative group work?

Tabletop Moviemaking was born to be a groupwork project. It taught my students that "the group" is always more talented than any individual. Students discovered strengths in their classmates that they'd overlooked before.

What were some of the memorable parts of the process?

Most memorable was my surprise at the talent and dedication of my students.

* Students who habitually fail to complete homework miraculously remembered to fabricate set elements and props at home each night...and remembered to bring them to class too!

* When group members were absent, the full group met at lunch the next day to finish what they were unable to in class.

- * A 5-minute lesson about editing in iMovie was enough to motivate students to fly high with their own ideas! Finished films included rich and dramatic sound effects, forays into flashback, impressive title slides, and efficient storytelling.
- * My students were funny, great actresses, and clever.
- * All inhibitions about acting or speaking in public vanished when students spoke for a tiny cardboard character.
- * All scripts told a complete story, following Freytag's pyramid.
- * Students did not attack each other with scissors and glue, instead taking the project very seriously and working quietly and diligently in class.
- * During the film festival, students were supportive of other group's work, doling out compliments and noticing with a sharp eye how the filmmakers had created their intended effects.

What were some of the challenges?

The challenges were time management and keeping the classroom organized. I prepared for these challenges ahead of time by giving each group a dedicated folder for their scripts and props. I called out "Time Remaining" frequently during the class period.

On a personal note, it was a bit exhausting for me to facilitate the chaos of moviemaking. However, the classroom was enveloped in a wonderful sort of creative chaos that I grew to cherish. Once I let go of my neurotic tendency to want know the exact progress of each group, or my desire for all groups to be on the same step of the project at the same moment (not going to happen), I was able to trust the students to get the movie done in the best way they knew how. The results were breathtaking, and I will be much more relaxed and trusting from the start next time I assign this project.

Another fear I had was my lack of prowess in the moviemaking field. The tutorials on Brick's DVD, however, were all the training my students needed to make wonderful, professional quality movie

Any recommendations to other interested teachers?

Do it! It was the highlight of the year for my students, and it taught them wonderful Language Arts skills, media/technology skills, group work skills....and gave them a sense of pride in themselves.

Student Movies (a note on content: they adapted a short story about a mysterious death, so the students adapted their own interpretations of the event):

More information on Tabletop Moviemaking:

www.tabletopmedia.org