

Teaching Tip: Video Essays

The best teaching technique I ever developed was in my TV Production class. I decided to get away from assigning short student projects which I called “video essays.” Frankly, students usually had little to “say” in their videos, and the experience was always a little flat for students and for me.

I decided to produce four half-hour programs for our local public-access channel. I wanted to do something that was worth the huge effort it would take on my part, so I chose the topic of human rights. I talked a faculty member from our African Studies program into hosting the show, and although he was hesitant at first, he eventually became highly enthusiastic and took on much of the workload. We had four guests--one per program--from the local community. Each person had a particular expertise with regard to human rights. For instance, one guest was a lobbyist for children's rights, while another was a historian who had researched a local racist riot. Students directed and edited the programs and ran cameras, lights, audio, and so forth.

I think that the idea worked in several ways. First, students created a real TV series that would be seen beyond the campus. Plus, students learned a lot about local issues regarding human rights. Students also learned how important “alternative media” are to the maintenance of a democratic society--as opposed to local commercial venues which would never have aired our shows due to the taint of controversy. For myself, I honed my video skills and made a friend in another department. We also generated a fair amount of positive press coverage which college administrators always like. Next, my colleague and I will work with students on another series concerning the crisis in the Middle East. It will be a lot of work, but worth it!

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