

iCritique – Digital Video in the Classroom Reaches Critical Mass.

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BACKGROUND

Much is being made of the digital revolution and its democratising influence on the learner. As digital technology becomes more accessible, and the tools for creating digital content become simpler and easier to master, the opportunities for learners to create their own digital content grow accordingly. This technology has the potential to really transform learning, and one area where there is particular excitement is in the use of Digital Video (DV) in the classroom. Through the availability of cheap DV camcorders and powerful yet easy to use editing software such as Apple's iMovie, it is possible for both teachers and students to create learning opportunities using DV. The applications are far-ranging. For example, media studies students could be asked to produce a 60-second TV advert as part of a drugs awareness campaign, looking at issues concerning youth culture and their target audience. Alternatively, science students could be asked to film an experiment and present their findings, combining text, sound and moving images. The ability to slow down and freeze frame what's been captured allows us to look at things in ways which would otherwise not be possible.

From October 2001 to March 2002 the British Educational and Communications Technology Agency (Becta) ran a DV pilot scheme which involved putting the technology into 50 schools across the UK. The pilot aimed to gather evidence pertaining to the use of DV technology and its impact on students' engagement and behaviors, and to identify models of effective practice in inspiring and developing students' work with DV.

Evidence from the pilot shows that the integration of DV into teaching and learning has the potential to enhance learning across the curriculum. In particular it can increase pupil engagement with the curriculum, promote and develop a range of learning styles, and motivate and engage a wider range of pupils than traditional teaching methods. Not surprisingly DV in the classroom also stimulates and supports the development of other skills, such as problem solving, negotiation, thinking, reasoning and risk-taking, and the high-quality work produced showed a greater attention to the uniqueness of the 'language' of the moving image.

As teachers and students become more adept at the planning, capturing, and editing of digital content, what tools might be needed to fully exploit and support

learning opportunities and raise the quality of work produced? An important factor in the success of DV in the classroom is that students benefit from a sense of audience, and are able to give and receive critical feedback. All writers write for an audience and video authors are no different. As John Davitt says in the Guardian:

It's vital to put in place systems that allow finished work to be broadcast on the school network or the internet or shown on the big screen. Without an audience, using DV might just be the expensive digital equivalent of writing for the wastepaper bin.

In considering this problem, I proposed developing a tool that:

- Simplifies the publication of DV work online
- Facilitates feedback and discussion from peer learners, teachers and a wider audience
- Supports a model of a learning community

As a fairly inexperienced developer, I also set out a number of rules that would govern the way the product should develop:

- It should be a targeted product that does a few core things well, rather than many things at a mediocre level
- It should be simple to install and manage
- It should be easy to use and have a scalable user interface
- It should run on low-cost web space based on open standards (PHP / MySQL)
- It should be 'future proof' through the ability to add additional media types
- Where possible, the design should not be prescriptive in the way the product can be used: educators and learners know best

INTRODUCING iCRITIQUE

Publish and Browse Media

iCritique is a web application (meaning that it runs on a web server and can be accessed over the Internet) that allows for the creation of an online community of viewers. Put simply, it's an online tool that simplifies the process of publishing and viewing Digital Video work on the Internet, and that easily enables online discussions of the work published.

Typical Workflow:

- A teacher or media technician uploads finished student work and enters additional information into the iCritique database; such as the name of the author, a short description and category

- Once uploaded, the work becomes available via iCritique's media browser, from which registered users can choose to view the work, start a new discussion topic or contribute to an existing discussion.
- Topics of particular interest can then be added to a user's 'watch list' so that they will be alerted via email the next time someone contributes to that discussion
- Designated users can be given moderator status, whereby they can edit or delete inappropriate topics and comments.

A Relational Approach

At the heart of iCritique is the application's ability to centrally organise and categorise media into a database, and automatically create asynchronous discussion areas that are directly linked to individual media assets. This 'relational' approach helps to focus dialogue between users and encourage discussions that do not stray 'off topic'. This also works to counteract one of the challenges teachers face when using the web as part of a lesson: The hyperlinked nature of the web (while offering huge educational advantages) means students are just one mouse click or Google search away from leaving the curriculum!

A Learning Community

iCritique uses a community model in the way it manages users: Before interacting with iCritique, users are asked to sign up by creating an account, which involves choosing a username, optionally writing a brief passage about themselves, and adding a website address if they have a homepage. This approach ensures that users build up a history of contributions to iCritique discussions, and over time, create a virtual identity within this bounded community. To further add to this sense of community, iCritique includes a general discussion area where users can discuss non-media specific topics and share technical support. In addition, the iCritique administrator has the option of making community announcements via a central mailing list of all members.

REAL WORLD USE

iCritique has generated huge interest amongst students and given them the opportunity for both wider exposure and productive feedback... a really simple program which has huge potential to create wider communities amongst small scale video producers such as schools and colleges.

Pete Fraser, Head of Media at Long Road Sixth Form College.

During development from beta to version 2.0, iCritique was piloted exclusively with Long Road Sixth Form College in Cambridge, UK. The college has approximately 1700 full-time students, most of which are taking A levels. Around 600 pursue courses within the Media Department, 450 taking AS or A2 Media Studies and 150 AS or A2 Film Studies. All Media students have an intensive introduction to practical work related tightly to the theoretical elements of the course and then undertake two assessed projects each year. Film students, whose syllabus allows less assessed practical work, are introduced to the equipment in Year 12 with non-assessed activities and then produce a full-scale project in Year 13.

Working alongside the Head of Media, Pete Fraser, and his staff and students I was able to continually develop iCritique based on feedback and suggestions that came out of everyday use, as well as fix minor bugs and design faults. This led to improvements including the design of a better media browser, the setting up of a general discussion area, and the addition of the ability to customise media categories. The advantages gained by working so closely with educators and students when developing learning tools are invaluable.

Within a few weeks of 'going live' we had over 100 students and educators signed up and just over 40 videos online. Currently there are more than six hundred members and over 100 videos. iCritique's initial impact on the students at Long Road was simply to give them encouragement and enjoyment from seeing their work online. However, the amount and quality of online discussions improved as the pilot went on, and it became clear that both students and educators need time to learn how to use web based tools such as iCritique. To help kick-start interactive use of iCritique, the college invited written reviews and nominations for best film. This competition resulted in almost all students having a go at posting and replying to comments and some lively debates about style and originality, as well as lots of general banter and peer encouragement!

Future uses for iCritique

Following a successful pilot, Long Road plans to introduce this year's students to iCritique earlier in the curriculum and feel that they are now in a stronger position to fully exploit the learning opportunities it represents. The relational model of databased digital content linked to asynchronous online discussions has potential uses beyond just working with DV. I am currently in discussions with educators from South Africa about the possibility of adapting iCritique to allow schools in rural districts to share and critique original audio documentaries and other educational content, published as low bitrate mp3 files.

It is impossible to predict the many possible future uses for tools like iCritique but what is clear is that software which supports the publication and dissemination of learner produced content will encourage a more complete approach to exploiting the Internet and digital technology.