



‘Doing History’ – Using Documentary Filmmaking to Teach History

Using primary and secondary sources and available technology, a group of Year 9 students created documentary films to explain the impact of World War I on individuals and engage with history.

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It’s a warm afternoon in C Block. Students are entering their Period 6 history class after having a maths test the previous lesson. I overhear snippets of conversation as I stand by the door to welcome my Year 9 class as they enter:

‘Man that was a hard test, I’m not sure if I passed.’

‘I had no idea about number 5!’

‘I think I did ok, I didn’t feel stuck on anything.’

I am quizzed by one student as he enters the room: ‘Miss are we doing that history thing today?’

‘Yes we are,’ I reply, ‘and remember the project goes for two weeks!’ I then move to the front of the room to write the following learning goal on the board:

Students will understand how historians use primary source material to evaluate the impact of war.

A few years ago I was selected, with a group of other teachers, to participate in the ‘Towards Transformation’ project facilitated by Apple at my school. This was an opportunity to work with a technology coach who inspired us to innovate and experiment with technology tools in our classrooms. The group included teachers

from a range of faculty areas, such as science, maths, English and humanities. One of the things I took away from this experience was to always focus on what we want students to achieve and do, and not what tool we want to use.

As part of the project, which extended over a whole year, we initially examined pedagogy and educational technology concepts such as SAMR (Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition)¹ and TPACK (Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge).

Around this time, the Melbourne Museum had a temporary exhibition on World War I from the Imperial War Museum in London. I visited the exhibition with my family one weekend, and afterwards we headed upstairs to see the *Love and Sorrow* exhibition, which explores the effect that the Great War had on Australian families.² While I wandered through this excellent exhibition I had one of those teacher brainwaves. You know the ones – they can happen while watching a film that you realise would be ‘perfect’ for Year 9 Film Study, or when you’re suddenly struck with an amazing idea for a classroom activity while staring out the window in the staffroom. The *Love and Sorrow* exhibition uses source material to tell the stories of individuals – such as soldiers, nurses

OPPOSITE: Soldiers of an Australian 4th Division field artillery brigade on a duckboard track passing through Chateau Wood, near Hooge in the Ypres salient, 29 October 1917. (Australian War Memorial, EO1220)

and the wives left behind – and how they were impacted by the war. It also looks at other aspects of World War I, such as the development of prosthetics and medical treatment for the wounded.

As I stared at a nurse’s costume in a display cabinet, I was struck by the idea that my students could do this – they could use source material to explore and explain the impact of war on individuals as so much of it is now digitised and accessible to the public. They would need to be taught the skills to find and then understand, analyse and explain the source material, but they could do it, I was sure.

I pitched my idea at the next Towards Transformation day and explained what I wanted students to learn and the skills I wanted them to develop. My Towards Transformation colleagues listened carefully, pondered the idea and together we brainstormed what students could use to achieve this goal. The idea proposed was to use iMovie.

Students were to produce a documentary film using primary and secondary source material to explain the impact of World War I on a specific individual. This would then lead to a written piece where students could evaluate the impact of the war on issues such as technological advances, conscription, gender roles, etc.

It was my belief that students could use technology easily available to them to create a product that combined source analysis, evaluation and engagement with history. In some ways the proposed project was a version of blended learning. I subsequently designed a series of

lessons on skill instruction and then students spent time researching and compiling their documentary.

Step 1: Lesson Planning

Initially, a series of lessons, predicted to take two weeks, was planned for the project. Our timetable structure is four (forty-seven minute) periods a week. In case students needed more time, a few ‘spare’ periods that could be used if required were also planned for.

See the table below for the outline of the lesson plans.

The project started with an excursion to Melbourne Museum to visit the *Love and Sorrow* exhibition. I contacted Melbourne Museum before we visited to confirm that students could film while in the exhibition, which they said was fine. Filming was to be carried out using the student’s own iPads.

Students were split into groups and specific roles were assigned to each group member, including:

- The Director – responsible for keeping all the source material together, making sure the timeline was followed, managing the group and ensuring they all worked together on the script.
- The Expert Historian – making sure what was presented was historically accurate and that their analysis and narrative was appropriate.
- Presenter – the on-screen personality! Worked with the Director and the Expert Historian to make sure everything was presented well.

- 1 Dr Ruben Puentedura’s Blog: <http://hippasus.com/blog/>.
- 2 ‘WW1: Love and Sorrow,’ Melbourne Museum, <http://loveandsorrow.com>.

Outline of Lesson Plans for Documentary Project

Lesson	Learning Goal and Focus of the Lesson	Progress Check
1	<i>Students will be able to explain who their documentary will be about.</i> Briefing on the excursion to the Melbourne Museum.	Students should know the focus of their documentary, have an idea of what primary sources in the museum are connected to the individual who is the subject of their documentary, and have a plan for the excursion.
2	<i>Students will identify how primary source material is used to tell a story.</i> Excursion to Melbourne Museum.	Students should have a clear idea of who they were focusing on in the exhibition. They should have looked at the exhibition website and some may have even noted particular items they want to observe and film a segment about. At the end of the excursion they should have collected primary source material for their documentary segment.
3	<i>Students will know about the origin, purpose and context of primary sources.</i> After the excursion, this lesson will include some direct instruction focusing on primary source analysis. Students will be provided with an example and then work on one of their sources.	At the end of this lesson students should have an idea of what sources they will be using and what still needs to be researched.

Outline of Lesson Plans for Documentary Project		
Lesson	Learning Goal and Focus of the Lesson	Progress Check
4	<p><i>Students will understand how historians use primary source material to evaluate the impact of war.</i></p> <p>Students will use this lesson to work on putting together their segment. Some students may need to collect further source material and further research their individual. Some students may collect additional information (e.g. about the condition of hospitals, quoting newspaper articles from the time that are available on Trove – https://trove.nla.gov.au/).</p>	At the end of this lesson students should be starting to write their scripts, research further evidence and assemble their narrative.
5	<p><i>Students will be able to draw conclusions about the usefulness of primary and secondary sources.</i></p> <p>This lesson will begin with some direct instruction about interpreting sources, corroborating with multiple sources and investigating the context and inherent bias in each source.</p>	Students continue to work on their projects, making decisions about which sources to use and what to say about them.
6	<p><i>Students will understand how narrative shapes historical understanding.</i></p> <p>Students will be developing their scripts and filming segments during this period.</p>	Students should have scripts written and started filming/compiling their documentary. Students may choose to do on-camera work, filming themselves talking about the sources and individuals (overlaid with images of the source material), or record voice overs with images of the sources dominating their segments.
7	<p><i>Students will use primary source material to construct a narrative.</i></p> <p>Students will continue to work on putting their documentary segment together this period.</p>	Students to continue working on completing their segments this period. These segments could be put together to form one whole-class documentary project.
8	<p><i>Students will know how World War I impacted on individuals.</i></p>	At the conclusion of the project, students will have completed a documentary film segment about one individual and how they were impacted by World War I. These segments could be put together to form one whole-class documentary project.

Step 2: Explaining the Project to the Students

I initially ‘pitched’ the project to the students, being honest and upfront with them that this was something I hadn’t done before and requesting that they give me frank feedback at the end of it as to how well the project helped them understand the impact of World War I on people at the time.

I have requested this type of feedback a few times over my teaching career and have found that it always goes down quite well with the students – they like giving feedback and if their suggestions are taken on board it gives them a real thrill.

I then explained the timeline, assigned the groups and the roles, and off we went. The students were excited about the idea and were keen to get started.

Students were provided with a rubric I had developed based on four descriptors: historical knowledge, inquiry and

research, source analysis and evaluative writing. Students would be graded as advanced, proficient, basic or low for each element.

Step 3: Skill-Based Instruction on Source Analysis and the Elements of Documentary Filmmaking

This was one of my first forays into blended learning, combining skill instruction with project work. I really wanted the students’ focus to be on source analysis and then presentation of their analysis, but I was also aware of the danger of students spending too much time on the ‘visual’ aspect of the project.

Lessons included a short period of skill instruction on source analysis and how to corroborate sources and interpret the usefulness of sources. If I had more time, I would have included more on the elements of documentary filmmaking, particularly on how this has evolved over time. More could also have been said about documentary films themselves

as sources and how they shape our understanding of history.

Step 4: Being a ‘Critical Friend’ – Peer Feedback and Self-Assessment

Part of the assessment of the documentaries was peer feedback and self-assessment. Students had to complete a self-assessment task when they submitted their work. If this wasn't complete, the documentary segment would not be accepted.

The peer assessment was patchy – some students were much better at giving constructive and helpful feedback than others. This was done in the classroom by getting three students from different groups to sit together, watch the segments and then provide feedback. This way each group had a variety of feedback to take on board. Those providing feedback had a sheet to fill in that asked them to comment on one thing the segment did well and two things that could be improved. Students then went back to their original groups and discussed the feedback from their peers and were given more time to polish their segment based on the feedback.

Step 5: Teacher Assessment

All the documentary segments were collected and a rubric was used to assess the students' understanding of the impact of World War I on the individuals they had focused on.

The results were quite staggering. All the groups submitted a segment, all self-assessment tasks were completed and most students had participated in the peer-assessment process (a few students had been absent the lesson we had run this process).

Students were averaging higher than a 'proficient' grade for the project, with many graded as 'advanced.' What was even more pleasing was that the students were able to translate what they had learnt in this project into an essay on the impact of the Great War, therefore deepening their understanding. Their skills in source analysis also improved, with many of the students going into Year 10 history with a solid base to continue to build on.

Step 6: Student Feedback on the Task

- 'I enjoyed making the documentary and learning about how people were impacted by World War I.'

- 'I liked learning about men and women in this project.'

- 'I liked the excursion and especially the technology advances from World War I.'

And my favourite:

- 'I really felt like I was 'doing history' with this assignment. I mean, this is what historians do, right?'

One of the best moments was when a student came in a few weeks later and told me they had showed their documentary to their parents and grandparents. They said their grandfather had then been so interested that they had gone to see the exhibition at the Melbourne Museum themselves. The student remarked:

'I felt like an expert because I could tell them about all the best bits to look out for before they went, and remind them which bits were in my doco.'

What Worked Well

Students came away from the project with a product they had created and a real understanding of doing history, which was a highlight. Also, their understanding of how to use primary source material was deeper than when I had previously taught it using more traditional classroom instruction.

What I Would Change in the Future

Timing is a problem in every classroom! I allowed two weeks of classes for this project and, of course, we ran out of time. This meant that some of the instruction was rushed. Students had to spend more time out of the classroom working on the documentary segment as a homework task. While there is no problem with this, I would have liked more time for peer feedback and student reflection that allowed them to improve on their work.

The timing of the excursion was also interesting. We went at the start of the project period. Although we had studied World War I before going on the excursion – so students had an understanding of some of the content knowledge – I would probably move it one lesson later in future so that students had more 'front loading' and knew what source material to focus on in the exhibition. Some students ended up taking video and images of nearly everything in the exhibition as they didn't know what to focus on, and others



LEFT: Herbert Murray, an Indigenous Australian who fought in World War I, c. 1917. (Australian War Memorial, P02360.001)

particularly the high achievers, could have easily incorporated some secondary perspectives into their presentations as well as drawing on the primary source material to tell their story.

Conclusion

One of the reasons I love teaching Year 9 is that it is a real year of transition for many of our students. They begin to form their own opinions about events and issues, and think beyond their 'teenage' self. Studying about World War I opens up the opportunity to engage in so many debates and discussions with students about topics such as conscription, gender roles, indigenous rights, migrant communities, technological advancement and many more.

didn't get what they needed as they were a bit lost. While students were able to supplement the material collected later and include further research, the opportunities provided during 'fieldwork' could certainly have been improved.

I would also have liked to spend more time looking at documentary filmmaking techniques and conventions, and to discuss how documentary films have changed over time. As a class we had a brief discussion about this, but due to time constraints we had to move on. Some students were very interested in how older history documentaries often featured a presenter on camera at historical sites talking to camera, whereas many newer history documentary films were based around a 're-enactment' style format. We discussed the positives and negatives of this re-enactment style and how it can influence the interpretation of events and historical understanding. It was an interesting discussion about historiography and interpretations that I would have liked to develop further, particularly for high-achieving students who often require some extension in the classroom.

During the course of this project I focused heavily on primary sources and somewhat neglected secondary sources. While some students sought out secondary sources to supplement their research, I would have liked to have included more instruction on the interpretation and use of secondary sources. I'm not sure how I could do this without adding more time to the project, but in reviewing the documentary segments, I concluded that students,

It can often be easy to look at these 'big issues' and teach content such as 'the causes of World War I' (an important topic, no doubt) but overlook the impact on individuals due to the lack of time. This project allowed the students to understand not only the bigger picture but also the impact that the events surrounding World War I had on individuals in Australia and around the world. I'll never forget the moment when one student who had been investigating the brothers Salo and Moritz Demant – who fought for Germany during the war – realised that they were German Jews and the consequences of this. Salo was killed during the war; however, Moritz, who survived the war, would be driven out of Germany in the 1930s.

Another group of students who were investigating Herbert Murray, an Indigenous Australian who fought in World War I but was later denied a war pension, were gobsmacked when they began to investigate the inequity and injustice against Indigenous Australians at the time. They remarked to me that Herbert had done the same as so many others who served during the war, and it seemed so unfair to them that he didn't have the same rights.

These are the moments we live for as teachers, the brilliant lightbulb moment when students start to consider their place in the world, concepts of fairness and equity, and express empathy for others.

I'll never forget the group I did this with, and the responses they had to their research. It's one of the highlights of my history teaching career so far.