

Cyber Humanities: Rigor and Relevance through High School Videoconferencing

By Lynne Sueoka

There are a lot of similarities between the current war on terrorism and Vietnam, especially music-wise....

Daniel and Russell, Fall 2004

Media coverage affects the way we view our world and possibly the way others view our society....

Chelsea A, Spring 2005

I saw a lot of darker tones to represent uncertainty and fear that often comes with growing up. And in the poetry I noticed that many contained verses on childhood, adolescence, and then at the end there are unanswered questions, which are more like statements.

Sarah, Fall 2005

War and conflict, popular culture, coming of age—our students explore these themes as they occur in art, music, literature, and film. Through videoconferencing and other online tools, our

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students construct new and enduring knowledge as they respond to essential questions such as “What does artistic expression, spanning time and place, reveal about humanity, conflict, and our future?”

At Moanalua High School Media Arts Communications Learning Center (dubbed MeneMAC after the school’s mascot, the Hawaiian menehune), “Cyber Humanities” is an ongoing series of videoconferencing projects involving Moanalua High School (MoHS), Molokai High School, and Osaka Gakuin University (OGU) in Japan. Cyber Humanities encompasses five teachers, more than 100 students, two high schools, one university, four projects, and two years of intense thought and interaction by everyone involved to make all of our learning more challenging and more meaningful.

Project teachers follow the backwards-mapping process outlined by Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins in *Understanding by Design*. We begin by discussing the universal themes and essential questions that are to be the foundation of the units and that will address the academic standards and engage students in experiences meaningful to their own lives. We design culminating products that will provide evidence of student achievement and then figure out the types of online collaborative environments that will best support the students through the learning process.

Art and Memory

This project addressed the question “What does artistic expression, spanning time and place, reveal about hu-

manity, conflict, and our future?” Each site explored the question through the particular focus of its own curriculum. The Molokai media arts students expressed their ideas and feelings through art pieces that they studied and created. The OGU English language students studied the monuments and artifacts of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Peace Parks, as well as narratives written by those who either survived the bombing or interpreted the war through poetry. They then shared the literary beauty of the Japanese reading and the English translations with their American classmates.

Our MeneMAC students, focusing on the Hawaii Content and Performance Standards for Language Arts, Social Studies, and Technology, began with novel study of *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien and *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, as well as poetry of war by Emerson, Melville, Owens, and others. They then selected various wars in our country’s history and researched and created PowerPoint presentations that documented the artistic expression during those times. They delved into the poetry, marching songs, and monuments from the Civil War through the current conflict in Iraq. As a culmination, they created their own artistic response to war—an image, song, or poem.

In the series of four videoconferences, two with Molokai and two with Japan, the students shared their learning and collaborated on studies of similar topics. Besides the videoconferences, they used the project Web site for introductions and posting of artwork and research and shared

reflections and responses through on-line discussion forums.

The extent of the depth and understanding of our student participants became evident during one videoconference with Molokai. The students had been sharing their interrelated perspectives of war through art and history and literature in chronological progression. The “real-time” time line that emerged allowed them to reflect on the changing nature of artistic response to war, from “The Battle Cry of Freedom” researched by our Civil War team and “Let’s Remember Pearl Harbor” from World War II, to the protest music of Bob Dylan and Creedence Clearwater Revival in the Vietnam era. As the videoconference sharing progressed, the students could clearly see how artistic response evolved and reflected changes in the societal and political landscape.

Media and ME

In designing the second videoconference project, the teacher team attempted more genuine collaboration in the interchanges, both in videoconference and online forum. We were rewarded by an increase in depth and complexity of student interaction as they pondered media coverage and cultural stereotyping, starting with topics such as fads and fashion and progressing to deeper issues such as political and cultural interpretations of history and current events.

Student participants sought to answer the question, “How does media impact my life?” and, with their classmates in Hawaii and Japan, to discover, “How are the experiences of teens in Japan and the United States similar and different as far as media impact on their lives?” Online magazine articles about popular culture, read by both the Hawaii and Japan students, brought stimulating discussions and a barrage of questions. “Do students in your culture follow fads?” “Does

media affect your lifestyle and in what way?” And on a more serious note: “What is it like to live in a gun culture?” (asked of the U.S. students by Japanese) When the controversy over Japanese textbooks and subsequent violent demonstrations in China hit the media, students learned to become critical readers and thinkers and to face the issues of “perspective” and “effect of the media on public opinion” in an authentic context.

Coming of Age

The essential questions for this project were: “What are some universal elements of the passage to adulthood and of the inexplicable in life (death, the existence of evil, conflict, etc)?” and “How do the arts, their appreciation, communication, and creation, reflect and bring meaning to this process?”

This time, we attempted to move the inter-site collaboration even further, opting to create student teams composed of members from each of the sites and subject areas and have them collaborate in videoconferences and on the discussion forum, as well as post their creative pieces in team galleries to build a collaborative understanding of coming of age. We also allowed the students more independence in shaping their team culminating products. Thus, in addition to the digital storytelling piece that the MeneMAC students created after reading *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger and studying and composing poetry, the multi-site teams decided to create bilingual team names (Hawaiian and Japanese), team logos or flags, and team lyrics to an original song composed by Osaka Gakuin’s tech support team (and Beatle aficionados).

Before the first of five videoconferences, each student participant posted a photo and introduction on the project Web site. During the first session, all sites met together and each site asked a series of survey questions

about coming of age. The Osaka students compiled the responses and attempted to draw some generalizations; the MeneMAC students began their poetry study and posted poems and Photoshop graphics on the site; and Moanalua and Molokai art students began their visual arts projects on the theme.

By the third videoconference, the teachers had divided the group of approximately 30 students into five teams, who spent part of their time communicating in the online forum and part of the time in team videoconferencing. Team galleries continued to grow with visual art from Molokai and MoHS art students, poetry from our MeneMAC participants, and haiku from Osaka. The fifth and final session celebrated each team’s name, logo, and the entire group rendition of the “Coming of Age” collaborative anthem, “A Stairway to Go.”

Humanity and the Universe: Windows on the World

This project is perhaps our most ambitious and reflects the teacher team’s continuing desire to move toward greater depth and rigor. The essential questions include: “What are some (often conflicting) views about the nature of humanity and the universe?” “What is the role of humankind in relation to the inexplicable in humanity and nature?” and “What is the role of literature and the arts in explicating the inexplicable?”

Results and Implications

In our two-year experience with videoconferencing, we have been impressed by the rigor and depth of student products and reflections. In the excerpt that follows, Daniel responds to the meeting of Israeli, Palestinian, and Arab writers at the Sheikh Hussein Bridge between Israel and Jordan. He connects the understandings he has gained through the videoconfer-

encing project with the current event and the role of the arts in the world beyond the classroom:

...That these people, despite their past and ancient quarrel, these 150 members of the arts community have the sight to look past the hatred and anger and see human beings on the other side, looking back. This is an extremely important step to comprehension. Like in our Art and Memory project, by collaborating with those from Japan and Molokai, despite the extreme cultural differences and of a somewhat touchy past, we were able to provide knowledge on wars and how very useless they really are. In both cases, new inventive ways of making connections are found and friendships, whether across a bridge or across an ocean, are being formed.

These studies provide a strong theoretical framework in which to pursue further investigation into videoconferencing initiatives such as Cyber Humanities and their potential to provide student engagement and academic rigor within the high school academic core curriculum.



Lynne Sueoka is a teacher and staff developer at Moanalua High School in Hawaii. She and her students have been featured in the Future of Learning video series I and II as well as a video produced by the George Lucas Educational

Foundation. They started their fifth interdisciplinary videoconferencing project in fall 2006.

The My Hero Project

More than 10 years ago, three moms of middle schoolers became appalled with the focus in the news on negativity and people acting badly. It was the time of the O. J. Simpson trial, and these moms wanted their children to consider positive, inspirational role models rather than the opposite. They started an online space where children and adults from around the world could write stories about their heroes and share them with the world. Today, the My Hero Web site (<http://www.myhero.com>) boasts a hero story database of many thousands of entries, along with short films about heroes, a hero art gallery, Spanish versions of many of the hero stories, current newswire stories about heroes, and an extensive teacher section that includes lesson plan ideas and a feature that allows educators to create Web pages of their students' hero stories or pages of hero stories on a particular theme.

Rather than people with extraordinary talents, The My Hero Project celebrates ordinary people who do extraordinary things. My Hero starts with 22 kinds of heroes: angel, animals, artists, business, children, community, earthkeepers, explorers, faith, family, freedom, hero's hero, life-savers, literary, musicians, peacemakers, poets, scientists, sports, teachers, women, and writers. Who would you consider a hero in each category?

Many of these categories conjure up the names of people who are part of the social studies curriculum. Stories of people making history come alive. Encouraging students to research and write about important people helps them understand significant events and times other than the present. Rather than memorizing dates, studying the people who lived and acted during historically noteworthy periods allows students to understand and identify with them, thus increasing students' propensity to remember and more deeply understand time periods and the learnings we hope to glean from them.

My Hero encourages student writing by publishing their work on the Web, where a global audience often responds. Research shows that students who know they are writing for a worldwide audience take more care with spelling, punctuation, and the crafting of their pieces than those who are writing for their teacher alone.

Two calendars—a daily calendar and a thematic calendar—name heroes to consider. On some days, there are names listed, but no links—these are stories waiting to be written by your students! On other days, there are names that link to hero stories that are already part of the My Hero database. The thematic calendar suggests a focus for each month, along with references to particular days in some instances.

The My Hero Project is a simple idea with such rich outcomes for everyone involved. This ongoing, ever-growing project speaks to the best in us all and encourages thoughtful consideration of what it means to be a responsible global citizen in today's world. This is the highest standard we can challenge our students to meet. My Hero helps us pave the way.

—Sara Armstrong, PhD [Need bio]

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