Selective Appropriation and Historical Documentary Making in a Special Education Classroom

Bruce Fehn  
The University of Iowa

James E. Schul  
Winona State University

We describe a special education teacher and a history teacher who, together, gave specific learning disabled (SLD) and emotionally disabled (ED) students the opportunity to make historical documentaries in a self-contained special education classroom. Students were diverse in race, gender and disability. Findings indicated documentary making yielded positive outcomes for students as well as for the teachers. By selectively appropriating desktop documentary making technology, teachers engaged students in a technology-based project. Documentary making also opened opportunities for teachers’ close interaction with students, while still managing a potentially disruptive classroom. Students, who struggled with reading and writing, completed an engaging, lengthy, complex history project and exercised historical thinking skills. This study has implications for using documentary making technologies for engaging and refining students’ historical thinking skills.

Keywords: Special education; historical thinking; documentary making; technology; middle school; learning disabilities

Introduction

To his teachers’ surprise and delight, Hayden won the “Oscar” for the best historical documentary produced in his special education class. (“Hayden” as well as all other subjects’ names are pseudonyms). The teachers’ surprise stemmed, in part, from this 8th grader’s inability to read or write. Hayden, to his knowledge, never had completed a project demanding sustained attention. Ms. Kaye, the emotional disabilities specialist, and Mr. Smith, the social studies teacher, were gratified to see Hayden’s pride as he accepted the Best Documentary Award, a trophy that looked just like a real Oscar, for “The Highest Degree of Brotherhood,” a Vietnam War documentary.

In the spring of 2011, we conducted a study in Mr. Smith and Ms. Kaye’s shared junior high social studies classroom. Both teachers worked in Garfield Junior High School, located in the American Midwest. Each day, for over two weeks, we observed Ms. Kaye and Mr. Smith teach Hayden and 22 other students how to produce documentaries. Ms. Kaye was a specialist in emotional disabilities and Mr. Smith a certified social studies teacher. The students were diverse in terms of disability, race and gender. They read and wrote below the level of non-disabled peers according to diagnostic tests administered in the development of the students’ Individualized Education Program. African-American and Hispanic students were represented disproportionally in the classroom forming less than 20% of the school population but 49% of the students in the study.
When we first began this research project, we wanted to learn whether or how desktop documentary making provided an alternative pathway to history for children who were not successful readers and writers. Mr. Smith invited one of us to observe his colleague and him implement an instructional unit wherein documentary making was the central project. In a previous semester, Mr. Smith had been impressed with special education students’ engagement with the project on the Civil War.

As research progressed, we found interesting the teachers’ lack of concern with content coverage or teaching rules of academic inquiry (e.g., Barton, 2012; Barton & Levstik, 2004; National Center for History in the Schools, 1996; Seixas & Peck, 2004; Van Sledright, 2011; Wineburg, 2001). Although the teachers sometimes asked students questions about emerging narratives, they seldom intervened to encourage acts of disciplined historical inquiry. The purpose of this study, therefore, revolved around examining the intent and effect of the teachers’ integration of documentary making into their classroom. The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) Why did the teachers have their students make historical documentaries? (2) What student outcomes were produced by the documentary-making project?

**Historical Documentary Making**

By integrating desktop documentary making into their classroom, Mr. Smith and Ms. Kaye implemented an instructional method rare among special education teachers (Lintner & Schweder, 2008). The literature on the use of documentary making is already emerging, but has focused solely on mainstream classrooms. In one study, Kathy Swan, Mark Hofer, and Linda Levstik (2007) wrote about a documentary project initiated in an elementary classroom. Secondary classrooms, however, have been the focus of most studies on documentary making. Researchers Mark Hofer and Kathy Swan (2008), for instance, focused on teachers’ initial use of documentary making in the secondary classroom. Numerous studies, conducted by James Schul (2010, 2012a), highlight secondary history teachers’ purposes with integrating documentary making into their classroom. Within a separate study, Schul (2012b) closely examined secondary students’ behavior as they composed history documentaries for a class project. Researchers have also explored historical documentary making to some degree in tertiary classrooms. Documentary making was found to be an instructional approach well situated to further tertiary students’ understanding of history making (Coventry xxx, 2006). Documentary making also was found to foster empathic development among tertiary students (Schul, 2011). Whereas historical documentary making has gained traction in the aforementioned mainstream educational settings, our review of scholarly literature indicated special education teachers, particularly those working in self-contained, rather than inclusive classrooms, have not introduced students to this mode of history making.

**History Teaching and Learning in Special Education Classrooms**

Special education scholars have been influenced by a central tendency in history teaching and learning, namely primary source, or evidence-based, history instruction (e.g., Barton, 2012; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Seixas & Peck, 2004; VanSledright, 2011; Wineburg, 2001). Leaders in special education also have advocated for specific learning-disabled (SLD) students to share opportunities with their non-disabled counterparts to study primary sources (e.g., Okolo, 2006). Scholars who have investigated history teaching and learning of students with learning disabilities focus attention exclusively on inclusive classrooms SLD and non-disabled students. Their studies of SLD students in mainstream classrooms have yielded encouraging results. Learning disabled students, for instance, have demonstrated the capacity to productively study
historical documents, deriving warranted inferences from historical evidence (De La Paz, 2005; Ferretti, MacArthur, & Okolo, 2001; Ferretti, MacArthur & Okolo, 2007; Ferretto & Okolo, 1996).

Although no research reports on historical documentary making in self-contained special education classrooms, implications from other research suggest historical documentary making holds promise for the kind of authentic, “multi-media design” projects special education scholars urge for SLD students. Over 15 years ago, Ralph Ferretti and Cynthia Okolo (1996), leading researchers in the field of SLD students’ history education, already recognized that “authoring tools” and Internet access fostered student encounters with visual primary sources (e.g., photographs and posters) whose meanings they apprehended. Authoring tools were used by Ferretti and Okolo, which now include the documentary making software, as “most profitable” for SLD students because they “can develop presentations that integrate text, sound, and visuals to illustrate the results of their investigations” (1996, p. 6). These special education scholars recognized that digital authoring tools positioned SLD students to interpret, analyze, and synthesize materials to produce, and not just consume, historical information contained in artifacts from the past. Using multi-media authoring tools, special education students therefore exercised domain-specific skills of history production (Gersten & Okolo, 2007), while having the opportunity to illustrate or “publically” share with teachers or fellow students, the results of their inquiries (Okolo, 2005).

Specific learning-disabled students demonstrated, moreover, particular enthusiasm for learning history through instruction centered upon visual sources such as photographs and posters. These students’ interest was significantly heightened by visual sources as compared with written documents. According to Ferretti, MacArthur and Okolo (2007) students “became much more involved and engaged when [a] lesson shifted from scrutiny of a letter to the editor to an examination of political cartoons published in the early twentieth century.” For example, SLD students became “highly engaged and enthusiastic” when teachers focused attention on viewing photos of city life in the early Progressive Era. Also, images opened opportunities for SLD students to interact with their teacher who, in turn, “address[ed] the difficulties that her [SLD] students encountered while attempting to understand history” (Ferretti, MacArthur & Okolo, p. 99).

Although we have no evidence of special education teachers offering students the chance to make historical documentaries, Ms. Kaye and Mr. Smith joined a diverse movement among mainstream elementary, secondary, and tertiary history teachers who have integrated documentary making into their curricula (Coventry, Felton, Jaffee, O’Leary, Weis, & McGowan, 2006; Fehn, Johnson & Smith, 2010; Hofer, Owings & Thacker, 2010; Hofer & Swan, 2008; Jaffee, 2006; Schul, 2010a, 2010b; Swan, Hofer, & Levstik, 2007). At this point, the movement remains fragmented with history teachers at various instructional levels, and within different classroom contexts, employing documentary making for diverse purposes. The purposes have included: using documentary making to help students better understand knowledge generating practices of academic historians (e.g., Jaffee), enabling immigrants (or children of immigrants) to express audio-visually their personal and family histories (O’Leary, 2006), and helping foster a comfortable learning community among students (Schul, 2011).

Since this study is informed by the aforementioned literature on desktop documentary making as well as history teaching and learning, we used Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) (Koehler & Mishra, 2008; Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Niess, 2011) to help
us analyze and describe the philosophy and practices of this study’s teachers regarding their use of historical documentary making. Although TPACK is a relatively new framework, it is based largely on Lee Shulman’s (1986) conception of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) that claims teachers transform content through a unique pedagogical lens that constitutes the professional knowledge of the teacher. Recognizing technological introduction profoundly shifted both knowledge-generating and pedagogical practice, Punya Mishra and Matthew Koehler (2006) conceived TPACK, based on Shulman’s earlier PCK formulation, as a workable framework to study how technology, such as those involved in desktop documentary making, affects teachers’ knowledge-generating and pedagogical practices that are closely associated to history teaching and learning.

**Research Setting and Subjects**

The teachers and students conducted documentary making activities in complex interrelated systems of classroom, schools, neighborhoods and community, as well as popular culture sites and informal social spaces. Subjects resided in a growing metropolitan area of roughly 70,000 inhabitants. In the 2010–2011 academic year, the school district served roughly 12,000 students in 18 elementary schools, three junior highs, two senior highs and an alternative high school. Students consistently scored higher on standardized tests than other districts in the state and nation.

Garfield Junior High (a pseudonym), where this research was undertaken, reflected Mayville School District’s disproportionate placement of minorities in special education classes. The school district, unfortunately, represented the national trend of disproportionate placement of African-Americans and Hispanic Americans in special education classes (Harry, 2007; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Numerous public documents and local newspaper articles, which have not been cited to protect anonymity, showed how and why the district had come under scrutiny from state and federal agencies for the “significant disproportionality” (a term quoted from a school district report) of minority students receiving special education services. Of the district’s 12,000 students 1,451 students received special education services. Whereas nearly half (49.01%) of students receiving special education were from minority populations, the minority groups represented a little less than one-third (32.47%) of the district’s total enrollment.

Upon entering the special education classroom where we conducted the study, African-Americans and Hispanic Americans disproportional representation was striking. Descriptive statistics revealed 56% of the study’s subjects were African-American and Hispanic American. Of the 23 total subjects, 10 were White (44%), 10 African-American (44%), and 3 Hispanic American (12%). In Period 6, 4 of the 8 students were White (50%), 3 African-American (38%), and 1 Hispanic American (12%). Period 7, with 15 total students, had 7 African-Americans (46%), 6 Whites (40%), and 2 Hispanic Americans (14%). Ten subjects were female and thirteen were male.

Besides being diverse in terms of gender and race, the study’s subjects also were diverse in terms of capacity and disability. There were eight students in Period 6: five SLD, two ED and five with both SLD and ED. In Period 7 there were 15 students: eight SLD, six ED and 1 with both SLD and ED. These numbers, of course, do not come close to indicating the complicated capacities and disabilities the subjects carried with them, including obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression and attention deficit disorder.

In every case but two, the teachers reported their students read and wrote at or below grade level. Most subjects, according to Mr. Smith, were “way below” mainstreamed peers in
their capacities to “make connections” and “think critically.” Ms. Kaye, however, believed two students had emotional disabilities simply because teachers with authority had said so. In other words, teachers regarded the students as too uncooperative or difficult for participation in “general” education classrooms.

Ms. Kaye and Mr. Smith, both White, worked in close tandem to implement with students the historical desktop documentary project. Near the end of the school year, the teachers assigned the documentary project with the Vietnam War as the common topic for the students to compose their historical documentaries. During the project, the classes were held in the school’s computer lab which enabled each student to compose his or her documentaries using Photostory 3™, a free-downloadable software provided by Microsoft®. Trained as a specialist in emotional disabilities, Ms. Kaye possessed long experience working with students with disabilities in both hospital and school settings. Each day Ms. Kaye assumed the lead for constructing a classroom context in which she, Mr. Smith, and students moved forward toward completion of the documentary project. This effort quite often required her to address individual student behaviors, such as raised voices or physical contact with other students, as she perceived to be counterproductive to the classroom environment. At some moments she was very firm with students and demanded they follow her directions. In other instances she calmly reminded students they had to meet specific requirements to attain a passing grade or good mark in the course. Many times, she lavished praised upon her students as she worked shoulder to shoulder with them in front of a computer to talk with them about how to use images and software operations in telling a story about the Vietnam War.

Ms. Kaye contributed her specialized training to move along instructional activities. When Mr. Smith, who had been trained as a history and social studies teacher, employed language she knew most students did not understand she translated his words into terms students could comprehend. When, for example, Mr. Smith first introduced the word “storyboard” to students, Mr. Smith interjected: “Think comic strips.” Ms. Kaye also dove with her students into their individual documentary making projects, offering them advice on selection of images or songs and helping them find a story to link images and sounds into a narrative structure.

Compared to Ms. Kaye, Mr. Smith possessed robust understanding of documentary making software and knowledge of how academic historians produce the past. While Ms. Kaye’s academic and experiential background was in psychology, emotional disabilities, and special education, Mr. Smith had state certification to teach American government, world history, and American history. He also possessed a Master’s degree in social studies education: a program wherein he attained familiarity with desktop documentary making and teaching history through primary sources.

Each day, when classes adjourned to the computer room, Mr. Smith moved from one student to another helping them move forward with various compositional problems encountered, including downloading images from the Internet, moving images from the Internet to the software, aligning within the storyboard, and so on. As was the case with Ms. Kaye, he encouraged students to analyze the images, find meaning in them, and make decisions about where to install images into their history of the Vietnam War.

While Mr. Smith helped students with technology questions, Ms. Kaye worked closely with students to shape their documentaries and managed disciplinary problems. In Period 7, for example, she worked closely with Juan, helping alight on a narrative strategy that juxtaposed images of home stateside and the homes infantry soldiers had to stay in while on combat duty.
While working with some students, and helping others who approached her for assistance, she kept an eye out for potentially disruptive behavior. Ms. Kaye never hesitated, sometimes quite forcefully, to insist a recalcitrant student get back to work.

**Method**

This study possessed what Robert Stake (1985, 2005) termed intrinsic and instrumental components. With our long-term interest in documentary making for history teaching and learning, Ms. Kaye and Mr. Smith’s use of the method in a special education classroom was intrinsically interesting to us. We were especially interested, as noted above, in whether or not historical documentary making provided an alternative pathway to produce history for those who found reading and writing either impossible or very difficult. The classroom environment Mr. Smith and Ms. Kaye constructed each day with their students intrigued us, in Stake’s (2005) words “in all its particularity andordinariness” (p. 445). Within the classroom, ordinary scenes such as Ms. Kaye and two or three students huddled together in front of a computer screen seemed freighted with meaning. A particular student’s remark about overhearing, on a bus, the conversation of Vietnam War veterans held significance.

Studying the special education classroom’s particularities and ordinariness, however, was also of instrumental concern. We were interested in whether or how documentary making in a special education classroom contributed to understanding how and why teachers with real classroom needs and goals selectively appropriated this technology. We know history and social studies teachers have appropriated new technologies for inquiry based learning, to enhance reading and writing skills, and to make public students’ work for larger audiences (Rosenzweig, 2011). With this study, we wanted to know about the selective appropriation of this new mode of history production in this particular context. Our research methods, therefore, were guided by our research questions: Why did Ms. Kaye and Mr. Smith offer their special education students the opportunity to make historical documentaries? What student outcomes did the documentary making project produce?

**Data Collection and Analysis**

We were interested in trends across the subjects’ purpose and practices regarding the particular appropriation of documentary making in this context. Since we wanted to make a judgment concerning each subject, as well as across the subjects, we chose to use “an evaluative case study approach” (Merriam, 1998, p. 39). All data collection and analysis revolved around the study’s research questions. Data collection occurred in three forms: observations, interviews, and document retrieval. We were influenced by Stake’s (1995) interpretation of methodological triangulation where he suggested collecting records in addition to direct observation as a means to examine multiple components of the same reality. This allowed us, the researchers, to check our conception of the reality of the phenomenon from one data source to another.

The primary data source for this study came primarily in the form of interviews with the teachers and classroom observations. To accomplish 23 classroom observations in 16 days, we focused our observations upon two different groups of special education students. The first class consisted of eight students in Period 6 and the second class consisted of 15 students in Period 7. Inside the classroom, we roamed from one student to the other, looking for instances that appeared to offer rich observations. We grew especially attentive to those instances when a student asked the teachers for help. Such instances, we recognized, were occasions when the researcher could listen to a teacher and student discuss the latter’s project. We could watch and listen, for example, as teacher and student focused on an image and discussed how it might fit
into a historical narrative. We took notes during these observations with the intent of examining the whole phenomenon involved in the integration, with an emphasis on the teacher’s perspective as well as that of the students (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

In addition to recording field notes, interviews with teachers also were an important data source for understanding what happened, and why, in the course of subjects’ historical documentary making. We conducted four formal, audio recorded, interviews with Ms. Kaye or Mr. Smith. In addition, we had informal interviews in the form of discussions with the teachers every day. The informal interviews yielded data on the teachers’ understanding of how and what they wanted students to learn or experience from making historical documentaries. We also conducted formal, separate interviews with each of the teachers, which we audio recorded. These we conducted at times when we could talk with Mr. Smith or Ms. Kaye for long stretches of time, with little chance of interruption. For these interviews, we tailored questions to probe, for example, each subject’s unique knowledge or experiences. Ms. Kaye possessed more refined knowledge than Mr. Smith of individual students’ learning or emotional disabilities. She shared her 10 years of experience in Garfield Junior High School, working as a special education teacher. Mr. Smith possessed deeper understanding of history teaching and learning than Ms. Kaye. He provided, therefore, more refined insights into whether or how students enacted historical practices such as whether or not a particular image properly fit into an emerging narrative.

Besides observations and interviews, students’ productions were the third source of data for understanding how documentary making worked within the context of this special education classroom. With students’ documentary stored on a flash drive, we studied their projects many times over. Students’ productions enabled elaboration and validation of data derived from observations an interviews. Ms. Kaye, for instance, once stated that Seth, an African-American student, could read and write at or above grade level, and should not be placed in a special education classroom. This observation cohered with the content of Seth’s documentary as it showed robust command of language and knowledge of the Vietnam War’s historical development.

Data were analyzed to address our research questions. All data collection and analysis revolved around these questions. The analytical procedures consisted of analysis, synthesis, and illumination (Shank, 2002). Thematic analysis is based on finding emergent patterns and trends that cut across data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Analysis required the dissection of data into manageable forms for the sake of interpretation and understanding (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). We used our theoretical framework to pinpoint, for instance, the teachers’ purposes and practices with assigning documentary making to their students. Synthesis required a reassembly of the data so that it “takes on a more anecdotal, more personalized, more interpretive character” (Shank, 2002, p. 138). To do this, we re-created the field notes, while tying in interviews and documents at the same time, to seek out emerging interpretations into what Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2005) termed a “working interpretive document” (p. 26). The numerous instantiations of this document represented our efforts to construct what we understood from our experience within the bounded setting of our study (Stake, 1995). In order to ensure validity of the results, we engaged in member checking (Lincoln & Guba; Stake, 1995) with Mr. Smith. Throughout the research study, Mr. Smith discussed our findings and agreed with us that our methods were yielding accurate claims. The next section is a rendering of the results that emerged from this data analysis. These results reveal why the teachers assigned
historical documentary making as a project for their students and they identify the student outcomes produced by the project.

**Findings**

This study yielded two key findings. These findings indicate: (a) the teachers assigned documentary making to provide students with a meaningful learning experience; (b) the students engaged in historical practices as they composed their documentaries. This section discusses these findings as they related to our research questions.

**Documentary Making as a Meaningful Learning Experience**

Although initially alert for instances of historical thinking in history education researchers’ senses of these terms (e.g., Barton & Levstik, 2004; Seixas & Peck, 2004; VanSledright, 2011; Wineburg, 2001) we recognized, while analyzing and interpreting field notes, this approach was leading to an impoverished understanding of history teaching and learning taking place in Ms. Kaye’s and Mr. Smith’s classroom. While focusing on the extent to which teachers and students enacted conventional historical practices, we failed to see what did happen at the research site. As we perused field notes and listened to our interviews with teachers, the reasons for offering students the chance to make documentaries became clear, and this rationale had little resemblance to the conventional historical practices of historians. Our data reminded us that “historians have no monopoly on the use and interpretation of the past, nor are their thought processes somehow superior to anyone else’s” (Levstik & Barton, 2008, p. 111).

In terms of Mr. Smith and Ms. Kaye’s words and instructional activities, it became clear they wanted, above all, to provide an experience in which students would fully immerse themselves in a meaningful activity outside conventional textbook exercises and worksheets. Documentary making, the teachers explained, made history interesting and accessible to students with diverse learning and emotional disabilities. Knowing most of their students struggled with reading and writing, documentary making provided engaging access to historical documents and opportunities for expressing visions of the past. Ms. Kaye and Mr. Smith felt special education students had always been short changed in terms of resources allocated to them. Ms. Kaye also had a political motivation for integrating documentary making into her special education classroom. She believed the activity helped compensate for what she regarded as an underserved group of students within the context of her school.

Mr. Smith and Ms. Kaye neither systematically taught students historical thinking skills (Wineburg, 2001), nor did they require students to construct what documentary scholar Bill Nichols (2001) termed “expository” documentary making, the mode closest in intent and construction to academic histories (Fehn & Schul, 2011). Rather, they gave students wide latitude for what they wanted. The only stipulation relative to the project’s objectives was the fact the production had to cover the Vietnam War. They did not require students to write a script and read it as a voice of god narration explaining the images, as is conventional practice with expository documentaries.

Two months after students participated in the documentary project, Mr. Smith reflected on the importance of not constraining the students’ documentary making activities. “You might get what you have in mind,” Mr. Smith observed:

but may limit the student’s experience. In my mind there is more value in the process than in the end product. If you are looking for a polished product and limit the websites students visit or the type of music they select or what they put on their slides they may
Students Engaged in Historical Practices as they Composed Documentaries

Students took advantage of the productive freedom to fashion what might be termed poetic documentaries (Nichols, 2001). Whereas expository documentaries feature a script that works in close tandem with images to produce a story or argument, Mr. Smith’s and Ms. Kaye’s students employed music to poetically evoke emotion and infuse meaning into their portraits of, for example, soldiers’ or nurses’ experiences during the War. Students regarded the selection of musical accompaniment as critical to the stories they wanted to tell. Matt openly celebrated when he finally found a song focusing upon the concept of revolution. A Hispanic-American girl, Evita, chose a contemporary song recorded by a Hispanic-American artist to accompany her documentary. Another African-American student also selected a contemporary song about a Black soldier returning from the Iraq (not the Vietnam) War.

Subjects enacted the following history making practices in the course of producing documentaries:

- Conduct of online research.
- Selection of historical content (images) from among alternatives.
- Alignment of images to construct a narrative
- Installation of a musical soundtrack to accompany images
- Image animation by focusing on a particular part of an image
- Employment of transition effects to move from one image to the next

The latter were special effects, which give the sense providing connective tissue between one image and the next.

While making her documentary, Monica, for example, enacted each of the practices identified above. Mr. Smith described Monica as “a joyful 7th grader who is a sponge for learning and knowledge.” Although “a very low reader,” Monica “jumps in with both feet and is not afraid to fail.” Indeed, the researcher observed Monica working intently on her documentary throughout the 16-day production process. She went online to search for images significant to her chosen topic: female nurses’ participation in the Vietnam War. As she found images that might work, she stored them in a computer file. Next, she followed her teachers’ directions to open the documentary making software program. The program, Photo Story 3™, enabled Monica to begin placing her images into the software’s storyboard. Using the Photo Story 3™ storyboard she experimented with the order of the images, moving them around to tell her history of Vietnam nurses. Monica worked independently, but occasionally used her teachers as resources. She asked Ms. Kaye if she could use a song she had practiced with other members of the school choir. Ms. Kaye thought this was a good idea. At the end of the documentary project Ms. Kaye celebrated the fact Monica “succeeded without a lot of adult help.” She pointed out that school was very hard for Monica, but the girl continued to work hard and responsibly.
Conventional historical practices with documentary films were even used by some, especially by a student in Period 7 named Seth. Ms. Kaye described Seth as possessing a lot of academic talent, but whose behavior teachers in mainstream classrooms could not handle. So, they sent him into special education classrooms. Seth was a physically big African American boy who was very non-communicative and appeared to work very little on his documentary. During the last three days of the documentary making project’s duration, however, he suddenly set to work, mostly before and after school. Seth’s production, as it turned out, was impressive academically but aesthetically did not capture the “Academy’s” attention at the film festival. His documentary contained images from the beginning to the end of the Vietnam War. While most students used few, if any, words, Seth infused each slide with many words explaining the War’s development from the time the United States sent troops until the time years later when the North Vietnamese’ military campaign led and so American helicopters withdrew realizing the entire embassy compound would soon fall. Unfortunately, the slides transitioned so quickly from one to the next, neither his classmates, many of whom were slow readers at best, nor the university educated teachers and researcher viewing the documentary, could keep up with the production’s frenetically paced narrative.

At the end of the project the eight students in Period 6 and 15 students in Period 7 showed their productions at the film festival, which occurred on the last school day before summer vacation. The best productions, according to a simple popular vote by the students that was administered by the teachers, received “Oscars”. As noted at the outset of this article, Hayden, a White student, whom Ms. Kaye identified as coming from an impoverished background, won the “Oscar” in Period 7. Hayden composed a documentary with transition effects suggestive of turning the pages of a Vietnam War photo album. The musical selection he chose, “In Color” by Jamey Johnson (2008, track 8), while perfectly pitched to accompany the images, in terms of historical content, actually had nothing to do with the Vietnam War. Rather the lyrics were about the experiences of a man seared by memories of the Great Depression and World War II. Given the production freedom the teachers offered, however, Hayden’s documentary was perfectly acceptable by the teachers since their lone subject-oriented criteria were that the narrative of the documentary should be centered on the Vietnam War. Teachers and fellow students celebrated and honored his production.

Conclusions and Implications

Whether in special education or mainstream classrooms, effective history teachers find ways to engage students, while taking into consideration individual capacities and ability levels. They do their work in widely differing community, school, and classroom contexts where they draw upon resources available and employ them to advance their instructional purposes. Teachers who assign desktop documentary making to their students are no different in that they may have a myriad of pedagogical aims for which to employ digital technologies (Koehler & Mishra, 2008; Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Some teachers want documentary making to deepen understanding of academic history (Hofer, Owings & Thacker, 2010; Jaffee, 2006). Others use documentary making to foster community among students (Schul, 2010). As historian and history educator Roy Rosenzweig (2011) observed, history teachers continually engage in a process of “selective appropriation” (p. 93) as they transform the digital technology for their own purposes.

So, it seems unsurprising that Ms. Kaye and Mr. Smith would have students make documentaries during the last two weeks leading up to summer vacation. They selectively
appropriated documentary making technology’s powers to capture students’ interest, make the past accessible to poor and non-readers, and open opportunities for close student-teacher interaction. By offering students the opportunity to interact with technology and surf the Internet, the teachers integrated an element of fun into the curriculum. They wanted, as Ms. Kaye observed, to have students “run” with the project and “find their own way.” There was even a political dimension to the documentary making activity: the teachers presented students with technological resources and activities to students whom they regarded as underserved in the school and school system.

Ms. Kaye and Mr. Smith were open to having their students experience the past in unconventional ways. Abandoning the textbook, test, and worksheet format, they enabled students to enter history through aural, visual, and the digital pathways (Coventry, et. al., 2006: Rosenzweig, 2012). By placing documentary software into the hands of Monica, Hayden, Seth and 20other special education students, Mr. Smith and Ms. Kaye provided the kind of authentic, project-based, multi-media experience special education scholars have been advocating for over 15 years (Ferretti & Okolo, 1996).

As the special education students in this study produced documentaries, we recognized that the curriculum, over the course of the school year, could have been purposefully scaffolded upon historical and technological knowledge and experiences subjects brought to the task. In the hands of appropriately trained special education teachers, documentary making can serve as a springboard for developing students’ historical thinking skills (e.g., Sexias & Peck, 2004; VanSledright, 2011; Wineburg, 2001), preparing them for a participatory, pluralistic democracy (Barton & Levstik, 2004).

Mr. Smith and Ms. Kay offered their students wide latitude to construct documentaries that did not adhere to conventional academic history or the expository documentary making practices familiarized by most historical documentary productions aired on television. They positioned the students to construct their own histories of the Vietnam War without requiring a script or voice narration. Many of the students felt free to add music that they thought best fit their particular historical narrative even though the music may not have been focused on the Vietnam War at all. These teachers instead used documentary making to provide students with a meaningful encounter with sources from the past while still engaging them in the process of history making. In sum, this study revealed that teachers of special education students, like Mr. Smith and Ms. Kay, can selectively appropriate documentary making technologies to move SLD and ED students from the margins of history teaching and learning toward the center of robust history education (Sawyer & LaGuardia, 2010).

References


Web-Based References


Author’s Bios

**Bruce Fehn** is Professor Emeritus of Social Studies Education at the University of Iowa. He has published in *Social Education, International Journal of Technology in Teaching and Learning,* and *The History Teacher.* Presently he is working on a project involving documentary making and adults with learning disabilities. E-mail: bruce-fehn@uiowa.edu

**James E. Schul** is Assistant Professor of Education at Winona State University. His research interests include desktop documentary making in history classrooms and curriculum history. He has published in *The Journal of Social Studies Research, International Journal of Technology in Teaching and Learning,* and *The History Teacher.* Email: jschul@winona.edu