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## **“It’s Kind of Twisted”: Professionalizing Discourse During Youth Documentary Making**

*Paul R.J. Teske*

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This qualitative research article explores how youth create multimodal rhetoric during a service-learning course at a local youth media organization. The study takes a detailed look at how a group of teens wanted to gain access to the Discourse of the documentary making process but struggled with the confines of conventions of film as were represented by the professional documentary maker who was their instructor. The research combines sociocultural and cognitive research traditions while investigating the teens’ and instructor’s relationship and interactions concerning the production of rhetoric.

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Nearly ten years ago, in *New Literacies: Changing Knowledge and the Classroom*, Lankshear and Knobel determined that school-based literacy had not changed all that much since the early 80s, despite the extensive array of technologies available to teachers and in spite of the diverse and often ingenious ways students use technology in service of their literacy activities outside of school. In the decade that has almost since passed, research continues to illustrate that little has happened in the K-12 arena to reverse Knobel and Lankshear’s assertion. Even when technology is present, the rootedness and dominance of traditional, “autonomous” literacy practices (Street 417) in K-12 classrooms persists (Warschauer, Knobel, and Slone 562; Leander 25; Scherff and Piazza 271). Meanwhile, technology-centered courses in schools are appended to traditional academic curriculum via electives, with little thought as to how educators might best integrate the tools with the established academic and professional discourses and pedagogical practices (Mishra and Koehler 2). These courses also do not widely address how the literacies associated with various digital tools connect to or contrast with more traditional, academic forms of literacy. Consequently, opportunities to engage youth in substantive discussions about how to express thoughts and emotions across modes of communication are rare, even though these are also the modes of communication that they consume and produce most frequently outside of school.

However, regardless of how technology is widely taken up in schools, acknowledgement should be given to the exceptional sites that do engage in New Literacy activities and practices, lest we overlook their progressive work and importance. These sites, whether they are an anomaly within a school or part of an everyday practice at a community center or after school program, give young people an alternative form of expression that often better honors their personal identities and dispositions than formalized, academic literacy. Additionally, these sites provide educators with ideas of how New Literacies connect with the practices and products associated with more traditional education environments (Alvermann 8; Hull and Nelson 251; Ranker 208). In particular, many of these sites make video production accessible to young people, and in the process, they advance and legitimize multimodal forms of literacy, perhaps signaling a shift in the value we place on video as a serious tool of expression for everyday use by everyday people. Although research has illustrated the complex thought processes and activities that students go through while crafting meaning during multimodal text production (Ranker 208-229), as well as the complicated set of layered constructions that go into generating multimodal digital texts (Hull and Nelson 232-251), less has been written about how adolescents learn and take up multimodal discourses, especially when they are coached by experts in how to effectively build meaning through these tools.

It is the intent of this paper to fill the gap in this body of literature by illustrating how four high school seniors, during a spring quarter service-learning course, collaborate in the making of a non-fiction documentary with the assistance of a professional producer/director/instructor. By looking at the activity as a literacy practice, I specifically aim my inquiry at how students collaboratively produce a nonfiction story and engage in meaning making as they are guided by the instructor, a professional documentary maker. In doing so, I also examine the impact the instructor's professionalized knowledge has on the teens' processes and products.

## Conceptual Framework

Given the emerging nature of video and film production as an alternative literacy practice, it is not surprising that non-traditional learning venues, such as youth media organizations, have taken on the role of teaching youth how to use technology as a means of expression. Although once acting primarily as independent facilitators of digital learning, these groups have begun to act in collaboration with schools through special partnerships. Although many teens engage in literacy practices on their volition using various media for different purposes (see Gazzetti and Gamboa 408; Stone 49), collective spaces such as youth media organizations (YMOs) have long provided an organized way for teens to tell their own stories while engaging in and being guided through technological and literacy practices that often

involve issues of social justice and resistance to mainstream ideology and thought (Chavéz and Soep 409-410; Goodman 2-3). YMOs act as sponsors of teens who ultimately engage in enriched literacy and technological experiences in spaces that traditionally have been outside of school, and consequently outside of typical literacy practices—the contours of which have been described in the work of such researchers as Hull and Schultz (575-611), Heath and McLaughlin (278-300), and Chavéz and Soep (409-434).

As alluded to earlier, the greater prevalence of technology as a means to produce multimodal messages signals a historical shift in how we compose meaning, and YMOs have proven central to this change by giving teens access to digital skills and multimodal discourse practices. Consequently, YMOs have been positioned as sites with specific literacy knowledge of mediums that are consumed ubiquitously within the culture but have only recently been made broadly accessible as a practice of production, as demonstrated by the massive growth of YouTube and other video-sharing sites. YMOs engage teens intentionally to bring them into specific discourse communities and practices, acting as sponsors to the youth (Brandt 167). Brandt suggests that literacy practices are influenced by historic shifts, including those that are fused with changes in technology. Consequently, broad social movements impact how people engage with reading and writing in all its manifestations, and the means by which people come to engage with particular discourses is through the act of sponsorship. Brandt defines sponsors as agents “local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). Consequently, literacy takes its shape from the interests of its sponsor, affecting what, why, and how those that are sponsored take in and express information. However, while Brandt surfaces the stories of these relationships in benevolent ways, she does not dig deeply into the relationships between sponsor and sponsored or the tensions that may arise in their relationships.

The tensions that grow as part of the expert-novice relationship might best be described through several overlapping theories of learning and social practices, including cognitive apprenticeship (Collins, Brown and Holum 6), “communities of practice” (Wenger 6-7, 45-47), and the strategies and tactics of living everyday life (de Certeau 29-38, 52-56). My research suggests that instructors of video and film production not only take on the role of sponsor within this new literacy practice but also must negotiate the terrain of discourse professionalization with their students, teaching young people the tools of video and film production, as well as the language of film and the expectations of the craft. In doing so, struggles between the knowledgeable expert and his or her students often arise.

While the literature on cognitive apprenticeships does not by its nature delve into the relationships between expert and novice, it does focus on a line of instructional praxis in which the thinking of an expert becomes more transparent, with an instructor (often a teacher) taking on the role of a subject area expert who makes visible how people think in particular contexts and fields of study, e.g., an historian (Wineburg 319-346), mathematician (Shoenfeld 334-370) or expert reader (Linkon 247-274). The intent of this approach is to surface the cognitive processes of experts by having novices observe, enact, and practice any given task with the help of a more knowledgeable other. The approach is intended to draw upon Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" but with the addition of an instructional element with a disciplinary lens (85).

In contrast to "cognitive apprenticeships," which focus on the modeling of the thinking processes, the concept of "communities of practice" extend apprenticeship models of learning to specific contexts and sets of relationships (Wenger 6-7). Apprenticeship learning models are often performed within a place and social system, making the concepts situated within a particular space, culture, or profession. "Apprenticeship forms of learning are likely to be based on assumptions of knowing, thinking, and understanding that are generated in practice, in situations whose specific characteristics are part of practice as it unfolds" (Lave 19). Apprentices learn to think, act, see, and respond to the world in increasingly specific ways with activities taught through modeling in real-world, disciplined, and professionalized situations, first as peripheral and then as central participants in the task. Wenger fleshes out this concept by suggesting that these spaces are sites of continual and productive conflict in which practices are revised and renegotiated as newcomers enter a community (101). Such sentiments are also predated by the New London Group's notion of "redesign" in which products, not just practices, of communities and individuals are constantly transforming the designs which came before them (Cope and Kalantzis 23).

Although research on the relationship between the expert/instructor and novice/youth in learning communities outside of schools and within the domain of New Literacies has not been greatly explored, two studies stand out as exemplars for illustrating the productive resistance and unique pedagogical practices associated with New Literacies when taught within a more formalized setting. Chavéz and Soep nicely describe how the apprenticeship model of learning within a community of practice at YMOs garners a unique relationship between adults and teens in these non-school spaces. "While Youth Radio is a partner and resource for [schools], the [YMO] also generates material that is in some cases critical of standard school practices and subsequently offers alternative pedagogical methods that can inform what happens within classes" (Chavéz and Soep 141).

Chavéz and Soep deem this unique relationship a “pedagogy of collegiality,” which is explained as “a context in which young people and adults mutually depend on one another’s skills, perspectives and collaborative efforts to generate original, multitextual, professional-quality work for outside audiences” (141). The authors’ case study of two young people who work within Youth Radio illustrates how youth voices are multiple and varied, shaped by their interactions with the spaces in which they work and the adults with whom they have contact. They also demonstrate how the teenagers were challenged by those whom they interview and by those who aimed to teach them the production process within a “culture of critique” (Soep 748).

The most salient aspects of the Chavéz and Soep concept of pedagogy of collegiality studies in relation to my research is how youth go through mediated intervention—moving from reactionary and simplistic responses to more complex and nuanced understandings of the content with which they are engaging and the arguments they are making. In Chavéz and Soep’s first study, this process is detailed via one youth’s journey through the production stages of a radio broadcast, which illustrates how the teen began with a “rant” against George Bush and then worked with peers and adults to develop a news story about civil liberties. In reading this account, one is able to see the rhetorical shifts in the student’s argument as he receives feedback from others. For example, after the teenager wrote his initial piece, peers questioned whether “going off” on someone was really the most effective way to deal with the problem, and the adults challenged the teen to dig more deeply into his central premise by performing interviews and doing more research (427). As the production of the piece continued, the teen worked with mentors (sometimes heatedly) to finely craft a final piece for public release. This process made visible how the youth moved toward mediated intervention, as opposed to just reactionary impulse, by applying the medium’s expectations and conventions to his work.

In contrast to the work of Chavéz and Soep, where the learning struggles tightly focused on the production of a piece of writing that was to be verbalized, my study attempts to further unpack the relationship between the instructor and the youth and how it influences compositional processes of multimodal texts. To further unpack how resistance is expressed and for what intention, I turn to de Certeau’s theory of everyday practice as a framework to investigate the dynamics between the teenagers and instructor I studied. De Certeau suggests that every day behaviors are entrenched in systems of power and cultural production, and within these systems, resistance and oppositions are continually at play. Dissimilar to theories and research that describe people as generally passive consumers of the manipulative practices of producers, he suggests that the relationships between consumers and producers are more complex, layered and

contradictory. In general, however, “tactics” are defined by de Certeau as an art of the weak, and in contrast, “strategies” are the art of the strong, the authority, or the controller of Discourses. Those who enlist strategies do so as a means to “manage relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats” (de Certeau 32). The weak maneuver within the controlled, managed space, making do with what they have and taking advantage of opportunities to “poach” or diminish the authority in some way—whether the authority is located in a person (like an instructor) or a thing (like language). In relation to Discourse, language is a tool to be monitored and regulated by those in power, and it is also a stronghold to be assailed in tactical ways by those who are not part of the rule-making system. This study illustrates how youth both engage with and resist the conventions of literacy through the medium of video. Consequently, my research is meant to not only illustrate the nuances of expressive mediation in the creation of a final multimodal product, but also how the pedagogy and the conventions of professional documentaries might be resisted by youth who have different goals, outlooks, and dispositions toward learning the equipment, software, and language that facilitate expression within the medium.

## Method

How the students made meaning during video production is the central focus of this study since video development, exchange of ideas, exhibition, and feedback could be observed readily and naturally between students and students as well as students and instructor. Video production is a continuous state of progressive revision much like writing (Berieter and Scardamalia 24; Hayes and Flower 12), and the process of collaborative video-making tends to decelerate the composing process. This makes the composers’ reflections, purposes, and decisions more explicit and visible as the group deliberates, searches for and weaves together appropriate video and audio components, as does the deceleration caused by the tools that are being used and the composers’ subsequent fluency. As a result, the thought process that went into video composing was fairly visible and easily recordable. Additionally, documentary was the referential backdrop for this study. Documentary film/video by nature has goals to inform and “convince, persuade, or predispose us to a particular view of the actual world we occupy. Documentary work does not appeal primarily or exclusively to our aesthetic sensibility,” but rather gains its power from its “rhetorical or persuasive effort aimed at the existing social world” (Nichols 69). Additionally, while some documentaries attempt journalistic balance within what is presented, documentary is not usually concerned with presenting all perspectives. Consequently, youth documentary making seemed like the natural incubator for witnessing slow-moving meaning making in contrast to typical compositional processes

for informative and persuasive writing since the teens had to figure out a position or point of view for their work.

### **Setting**

Given the research question, I sought environments in which youth were actively engaged in documentary making within a robust, non-school setting. The Northwest Film Center located in Portland, Oregon<sup>1</sup> was one such location. The center was established in the early 1970s at Portland State University with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts as one of 12 sites nationally. Then in the mid 70s, the university released the center from its auspices for being too vocationally centered, handing it over to the Portland Art Museum. The center now has a healthy relationship with the public schools, but it is still its own entity. Its home is an open, white-walled, sun-drenched space with high ceilings. In its dark, back corners are computer labs where the editing process occurs. It has a feel of arty openness—a space of serious play and creativity. The center's web site highlights special screenings of youth-made documentaries that were then for sale on such topics as the epidemic of rural methamphetamine making, the dangers of club drugs, the vilification of a high-minority high school in a low-income neighborhood, and girls who had relatives in prison, the title of the work aptly named "Girl Scouts Beyond Bars" (NW Film Center).

### **Participants**

My research represents an ethnographic case study (Merriam 178-180), which examines how teens design, construct, and revise rhetorical elements and points-of-view while composing videos and films within the bounded (Smith 342) and integrated (Stake 2-12) system of the Northwest Film Center. The participants in this study include a group of four high school seniors and an instructor. I arrived at my subset of four teenagers through a generic, funnel sampling sequence. While my selection of the class at the Northwest Film Center was based on convenience and which instructor was willing to work with me, the selection of student participants within the class was controlled.

The student group consisted of one young woman and three young men. All were from middle-class backgrounds, and all the students were going to enter college the following year, but they were not altogether sure where they would be enrolled. Each had a background in the arts. Darbi had taken guitar for several years, but found the activity dull after a while and then became part of a hard rock band. He also made simple comedic videos with friends as a child. Another student, JP, was into piercing and body art, and he expressed a deep interest in alternative music and experimental sound, enough so that he recently modified an electronic keyboard to make it sound more electric by placing steel pegs under the keys. The third young man, Ralph, also played guitar and had a particular affinity for playing gypsy

jazz. Lastly, Adia was the only student subject who had a formal background in visual art; she just completed her IB examines in art where she presented twelve paintings and had to make commentary on them to the judges. She referred to this process as “bullshitting” since she insisted that her paintings did not have great meaning or deep symbolism. She related the story of why she incorporated a nude in her collection. It wasn’t to show “innocence or vulnerability, but instead I just had a lot of nude color paint I had to get rid of.” I mention these participant details to illustrate the student’s dispositions and reactions toward art and the creative process. At once they were independent and clever in their seeking out of artistic expressions that suit their needs to be creative, but they also seemed quite grounded in their application and the meaning of those talents.

The instructor, Simone, agreed to work with me on this project. She was formally trained in filmmaking at a leading university in New York City. She suggested that she learned much of the craft through experience and interaction with others in the community. I first met Simone after she returned from the Sundance Film Festival where she was networking with others. She was an independent filmmaker by profession and owned a documentary company with her husband. Simone had been creating non-fiction film for about twenty years and teaching at the center for roughly eleven. Her work has primarily been non-fiction, and as she stated, her work had been a “combination of commissioned pieces that people would hire me to do and independent work, you know, that are completely of my own imagination... [laughs] propulsion.”

### **Data-Collection Strategy**

The process of filmmaking (planning, filming, editing, and exhibition) guided the structure of my data-gathering approach. The data were collected over a four month period and included:

- eight hours of classroom observations during which the instructor led the students in planning, critiquing each other’s work, and learning the technical skills of using camera, lighting, and audio equipment, as well as the editing software
- a one-hour interview with several mini informal interviews during which the instructor and I spoke about how she viewed documentary making, if she used or taught the students filmic strategies for persuasion, and what sort of struggles and successes she perceived the group as having
- a five-hour observation during which I observed students taking film footage, interviewing subjects, and driving and conversing in their car between sites
- an hour-and-half-interview with the group of students, which spurred them to reflect on their footage and begin planning for the editing stage

- a six-hour observation/cognitive interview during which students edited and assembled footage
- a one-hour interview with the students during which the documentary was reviewed and the group talked about its process and how it made expressive choices
- a half-hour concluding interview with the instructor reflecting on the students' work and its strengths and weaknesses, as well as on her interaction with the group

The instructor and student interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Both sets of interviews were semi-structured, and I used probes to follow leads that seemed fertile territory to explore issues of sponsorship and professionalization, and how and if rhetoric was collaboratively developed in documentary making. The semi-structured format allowed me to follow a set sequence of questions pertinent to my subject matter while at same time allowing for impromptu inquiry into key issues.

I coded all data points with the same set of codes in order to link my data across subject observations and interviewing episodes. Participant comments were parsed and coded according to the key words or concepts that were elicited during the subject's response, words and phrases that seemed particularly intriguing, and statements that were related to the crafting of multimodal expression in collaboration. Data were coded by:

- the part of the composing process it reflected (e.g., planning, drafting, revising)
- the types of issues that arose as students crafted their documentaries (e.g., technical or film Discourse knowledge)
- the locus of idea generation (e.g., names of youth or instructor involved in various ideas that were floated or used in production)
- the type of rhetorical/meaning-making strategies being employed to create a story (e.g., humor, chronology, characterization, etc.)

As the theme of resistance emerged from the data, transcripts and observations were reviewed and further coded to be able to investigate how strategies on the part of the instructor and tactics on the part of the teens were employed and to what effect.

## Findings

### **The Strategies of Professionalization**

The class met twice a week for two hours after school over the course of approximately three months. The students would trickle in, some on time, others not, usually wedging this course between other academic and personal activities. The course was made possible by a grant, so the students attended for free as part of a service learning class. Their goal was to create a mini documentary within the genre of profile which focused on a group

or organization that was a positive force in the community. The genre of documentary profile was determined to be the most suitable format for the objective and was reported as being the easiest genre for newcomers to documentary making to understand. The students informed me that they “pitched” their ideas for a documentary that would fit the theme of the class to Simone. Darbi, whose topic was Meals on Wheels, had his idea selected by Simone. His father knew the founder, which seemed to be a key component to getting chosen, according to the students. The other three students in the group decided to work on Darbi’s project idea. He subsequently became the project lead.

Simone professionalized students’ actions and understanding of the filmmaking process. For instance, Simone had the group perform an activity related to skills that were needed for a particular step in production. One session was on how and when to set up lights. Another was on interviewing. Others were on how to edit. The group productively fumbled through the sessions. During the sessions I noticed how students were acculturated into the world of film and video production. Simone directed them in the proper terminology and expressions used in the trade, such as softbox, speed ring, scrim, “strike,” “wrangle the cable,” and wee light. Through her introduction to language of the field, she professionalized their responses to tasks and behaviors.

Simone’s professionalization also spread into the teaching of the language of film, of which students were very curious. The students were inquisitive in their hands-on learning of equipment. Simone even fielded a question about whether or not professionals in the industry use the LCD. She responded by asking whether it was more important to look professional or to use the tools to do the job correctly, in a way separating herself from simple dichotomies of professional and amateur. The teens were also interested in how to construct meaning within and between shots. For instance, Darbi asked how to piece together a story using B-role and when to use jump cuts. Simone answered these questions from her professional experience that centered on audience perceptions and the psychology behind the integration of images, sound, and vocalized text. In response to the jump cut question for instance, she warned that jump cuts need to have “a purpose and if they do not the audience will question the filmmaker’s skill and intent.” These were impromptu episodes of teaching rhetoric and filmic language within the bounds of convention and professionalism. The students wanted to gain access to this knowledge, thus showing a desire to engage in the discourse of documentary.

She also taught how visual effects impacted the meaning of the piece, again citing how the audience makes psychological associations with what is rendered on the screen—often to rhetorical effect. For instance, while instructing the students in lighting techniques, Simone demonstrated how

primary lighting sources created certain effects to which the audience would respond. After talking about the topic for nearly an hour, covering such things as how to light faces and how to read the lighting through the camera, Simone quickly removed the black, opaque Velcro screen that covered the window and questioned the students as to how to work with and adapt to natural light while making special note of the “drama” that was created in the blue-toned colors that poured in on one side of a student’s face. Simone’s impromptu instruction of visual meaning making and rhetoric often emerged from her lessons on how to use the equipment. An example of this surfaced during a discussion of the benefits of the LCD screen. She informed the class that the device was great for getting a close-up from behind or in front of walking feet, producing movement and activity in the character of the subject.

The above examples are lessons in multi-sensory meaning making, emerging naturally from conversation and very much in the moment. An unspoken subtext of such lessons was that stories were created on the spot in film and video. It was up to documentary-makers to adapt in the field in order to capture usable components for story building. This was professionalized knowledge, and the students responded positively to how the tools could capture images, words, and sounds that could be used to produce meaning. Thus, they had to understand how to create the components of the language of film, and they seemed eager to engage in professionalized methodologies. This was clear out in the field. Simone acted as sponsor in the youths’ new literacy practices, as they apprenticed in the art of strategic cultural production during the gathering of footage. They were adept collectors of both vocal and visual footage that could be used as rhetorical components.

Two of the teens were masters at eliciting stories from their interviewees. This was partially attributed to Simone’s instruction during lessons. Adia said, “I guess going back to the beginning when we learned how to interview someone, she [Simone] said to ask the people to describe their history or how they came to be in this place.” Such questions were meant to put the interviewee at ease and to also build characterization through descriptive language that could easily be supplemented with images. The students were strategic about their interviews and layered them so as to pair different interviews and to pair images with the interviews in order to move the story along. Adia explained:

[The director of Meals on Wheels] was talking about special meals, so I took things that he had told us and then I had someone else say it or say it from their perspective to make it more interesting, so he wasn’t the only narrator. So when he started talking about how they get special treats on holidays, I could then have him introduce it. Or maybe then the recipient

might be talking about how they felt when they got their thing on the holiday. What they thought of it. It is kind of taking both perspectives at the same time. And I thought that would be interesting.

In this example, Adia showed the mental planning needed to build the story—essential to the composition strategy during video making. In comparison to writing strategies, the teens had to always look toward the future in their decision making in the field. How might the footage be used and in what context? Video making pushed these compositional strategies forward, while also providing the teens with opportunities to prime interviewees for image-loaded verbal responses.

From a visual perspective, during the day in which I went out with the group of teens and Simone, I tracked their taking of footage. 26 out of 37 shots that were taken that day were spurred by the comments of Simone, but as the day moved on the students took on the gathering of A and B role on their own. This was apparent as they shot footage of two senior citizens. Initially at both sites, Simone directed the students, informing them as to what footage to gather—the outside of the houses, the woman walking through her garden, the volunteers walking in, shots of the tulips—but as they visited with the seniors, the teens independently gathered footage of signs in the yard, lawn ornaments, and knick-knacks in the window. These objects and actions became the words and descriptions which would be used for characterizing the octogenarians.

### **Reacting to Strategies, Growing Resistance**

Interestingly, the teens did not receive Simone's instructional practices very well in the field—something I was not clued into until we discussed the shoot during an interview. Part of their disgruntlement stemmed from Simone's positionality as a professional. Darbi noted how he viewed Simone's style in the field in contrast to the student assistant: "Yeah we weren't [the assistant's] crew. She just gave us advice. While, like, when we were with Simone, she was treating us like a camera crew. And I am sure that is probably hard for her because she made a lot of movies, but we're not a camera crew." They described working with the assistant as "way less stressful" and perhaps more equal in nature, commenting that she would phrase directions as requests, "Oh I think we should get a shot of this corner of the building," and "She'd be like do you want to get one from over there?" Perhaps picking up on Simone's position between the world of a teacher and the world of a filmmaker, Adia added, "It is also hard for her as a teacher to know when to let go...I don't know."

The oppositional, though compassionate, stance of the teens toward Simone seemed to grow during the editing process, where her expertise in non-fiction story making and her vast knowledge of the language of

film was looked at as “boring” by the teens who wanted to compose an “alternative” view of Meals on Wheels but were stuck on the belief that “old people just aren’t funny.” Interestingly, the youths’ opposition to Simone and, by extension, the professionalized pedagogy, conventions, and Discourses she embodied, waxed and waned over the course of the project. The resistance was particularly noticeable during the editing stage of production, and by viewing how the students employed rhetoric, one can see how their interaction with a professionalized other altered their vision and perhaps added complexity to their rhetoric. This process established a boomerang effect where the students would toss out tactics to subvert the official discourse of the documentary genre, only to have Simone respond through strategies, thus altering the original tactic in order to make it more consumable for audiences. Such was the trajectory of tactics.

Combining de Certeau’s concept of strategies and tactics and Gee’s concept of Discourse, Lankshear and Knobel argue that genres are defined and controlled by those who have the power to define the Discourse in any given domain. Genres are controlled by historical movements, the identification of exemplars, and the production and reproduction of the genre through disciplined and professionalized means. In the case of the editing and renderings of the students, they were building insider knowledge of the Discourse of documentary to enact and participate in the documentary profile genre to show an individual or group in a positive light. As they collaborated, they traveled an arc of negotiation, bridging tactical conceits with the strategic gravity of convention.

The students understood the need to create a video that was coherent to the audience. Their film needed to be comprehended, and they did not want to come off as too experimental. In this commitment to logic, they showed sensitivity to the Discourse in which they were working. They relayed a story to me of an obtuse version of *Hamlet* they had watched in school as part of a lesson on how to adapt text to film. In relation to their own work, Adia explained, “If it is completely exploratory then, they [the audience] won’t get the information as well.” Darbi added, “We watched this thing from A&E about *Hamlet* about all the different versions and there is like this one and they are all in white and their faces are painted white and they are just yelling. It doesn’t make any sense.” In explaining why they had watched it, Darbi and Adia both answered at the same time, “Um, because no one would get it.” The point was made clear to them: Don’t get too weird with your vision or you may lose the audience. Nonetheless, the teens were committed to making an “alternative view” of the Meals on Wheels organization. Just how this was to look was hard for them to define - but it definitely was not the traditional documentary format.

The youths’ original idea for structuring the movie was to follow a meal from its inception to its consumption. As they envisioned it, the meal

was to become a quiet but central character in the plot and allow the story to unfold naturally. However, as they came to know the process of meal making, they realized that such a journey was not easily filmed or linear. This unraveled their idea and opened up the question about how to structure the film. Ralph, who was the major proponent of taking an “alternative” look at the organization, informed me that his idea was “shot down” by Simone, no doubt in sacrifice to building a storyline first. Darbi, who proclaimed half way through the quarter that he “just wasn’t that into documentary and interviewing and stuff” and that he “was just going to coast,” supplied an alternative structure to the alternative look of the Meals on Wheels organization: chronology without the meal angle, but with supplemental visuals. His comments about “coasting” or taking an easier route to completion signaled a shift in disposition toward the project. Darbi stated:

There is, like, a ton of different ways to start a documentary like this. Because you could do it chronologically, kind of like the way we filmed it, which kind of worked out. So we could use a lot of those B-role shots and kind of set up people walking in or we could use a part from Tom’s interview where he talks about that kind of stuff and then fade it into stuff while he’s talking.

Darbi believed this very traditional structure would supply the easiest backbone to the film, one that would allow them to easily complete the process without much compositional struggle. Because of his and his group’s commitment to chronology, they had to rely on the narrative structure that would be supplied by their main interview—the director of the Meals on Wheels organization in Portland.

As the teens began to piece together their footage, however, they became bored with the narrative and the structure they were using. It was not compelling. In a way they became enslaved in the chronological structure, and this caused a moment of minor crisis after five hours of editing. Simone and the students attempted to figure out how to visually establish time and place. Despite Darbi’s comment about the “tons of ways to start the video,” the chronological sequence they crafted did not move the story forward in a compelling way. The single narrative interview turned the introductory sequence, according to Darbi’s reflection, into a news report with “talking heads.” At the same time, Ralph, with the seeming agreement of the others, determined that Simone’s suggestion of upfront teasers of dialog from different characters in their story was too “formulaic” and “manufactured,” thus sending out a tactical response to established conventions.

To help assist their plot structure, a clock at the Meals on Wheels facility became the focal point and a part of establishing setting for the documentary, but the clock was also something that needed to be repeatedly shown throughout the day in order to establish movement, according to the

group. In the words of Simone, by using the clock, they were “building the tension of time passing,” but it needed a “pay-off in the end.” Simone noted that this was a “nice idea for a device but it needs to lead to something since you are setting it up psychologically in the audience’s mind.” Darby quickly inserted, “Well, there is no end of day; it’s 1:00 in the afternoon,” referring to what time the meals are delivered. His dismissive comments assume a tactical position against Simone and her adoption of chronology as being a suitable structure to work within, even if it was his idea. After Simone suggested that the clock sequence could be fudged so as to make it seem as if there is a completion of the sequence, Adia noted that “It would be hard to pay it off,” which was supported by Ralph, who added, “Yeah, we don’t have a sunset or her eating dinner.” Perhaps as a last ditch effort to save chronology and to gain “pay-off,” Adia suggested an alternative ending in which the events leading up to the end would be played backwards rapidly as if to show the cycle of the Meals on Wheels production and delivery system. This was greeted with a pause from Simone and the other group members, after which Simone warned them “to not just add stuff on because you think you will be bored.” These exchanges illustrate how the students began to subvert chronology in reaction to their relationship with Simone and the conventional structures of film. Once Simone began working with their idea, they pointed out its impossibility. And once the teens proposed what they deemed to be an alternative structural move for organization, she roped them back to conventional storytelling strategies.

Their movement from traditional chronology was not just a matter of reacting to Simone, however. In their moment of crisis and before Simone’s critique, the teens began undermining the traditions of the genre of documentary, perhaps turning to play because of their boredom with convention. For instance, Ralph took control of the mouse, determined to reassert his alternative look at the meal-making process. He took B-role shots of the kitchen machinery and edited them so as to appear in a quick, shuffled sequence. He did this to propel the action of the film along—a rapid-firing transition to release the audience from the boredom of chronology that they had established. Additionally, Darbi took footage of one of the elderly women that they interviewed and continually repeated only one short line of her response, “I like ham,” thus rendering her ridiculous. Darbi claimed, however, that this would not be put in the final version, though it was fun to play. JP took bits of sounds within the film, like one of the seniors saying “woop, woop” in response to something that happened while they were filming, and pieced them together in a type of musical march that was to accompany the main story. These instances suggest that the students were breaking the logical structure of documentary syntax. They took the footage they originally captured with the intent of meaning making and rendered them as scraps to be broken up and

reassembled for some other meaning-making endeavor, which was quite postmodern in nature and potentially “unreadable” by the audience. The documentary was becoming what Simone referred to as “pastiche,” and she made an analogy to a building in town in which the architect “just added frosting to a very plain building. It is very clearly glommed on to something that doesn’t work to begin with.” She urged the students to “figure out the bones first.” It was clear that she believed that following the conventions of storytelling, “with a beginning, middle, and end,” was the proper way to craft their documentary, not through “frosting.”

A similar episode of resistance to the conventional structures of film was captured early on during editing practice sessions as the teens worked with vintage *Gun Smoke* footage. Simone wanted the teens to use the footage to craft a story that was told linearly with overlapping sound and images. As Adia and Darbi collaborated, they created a plot that subverted the typical heroic narrative of the structure of Westerns. After becoming a little bored with cleaning up the clips and assembling them with traditional logic, the two started talking about how to create an alternative story. They pulled from irony as they sewed together clips that seemed to make fun of the hero’s ability. For instance, instead of crafting a typical fight scene in which the villain and hero battle it out in seeming fairness, they let the villain “haul ass” on the sheriff. They then jump cut to the sheriff looking at the villain in victory, subverting our expectations and hence creating humor. They also found outtake footage of the sheriff talking to someone off camera calling him or her a “creepster” as he licked his lips. They also took footage of the sheriff taking off his gun belt, reversed and forwarded it several times to humorous effect. Adia commented that “repetition is always funny.” All these takes and assemblages comprised tactics against conventional structures, thwarting traditional notions of the hero narrative through humor—not unlike *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*. While finding the teens’ work humorous, Simone did not see this as a novel form of narrative and urged the youth to simply put together a coherent storyline before experimenting.

Enacting a professionalized position, Simone commented that she wanted the teens to “learn narrative storytelling first and the reasons why they would use certain images and certain shots [in order to] understand the fundamentals and why they [the fundamentals] have worked for many, many years.” Simone punctuated her comments by placing them within a historical tradition of storytelling through filmic language; her job was to bring kids into the fold of using a particular Discourse. As she stated during one of our discussions, “They can’t just do what they want, there is a structure to it.” In the response to the young people’s tactics, she grew more committed (perhaps frustratingly so) to making them understand professionalized ways of thinking, insisting they use the conventions of film as they managed a new medium that combined a visual art form with

more traditional communication forms, such as newspaper journalism. The art of composing meant understanding story structures at a deeper level than what was readily facilitated by the technology or by the repertoire of accessible storylines that we all have in our minds. Simone commented, “It is like using a tuning device for a guitar without knowing how to tune the guitar yourself. What good is that if suddenly you have to compose and don’t know the scales?” Her comments were meant to address how people look for quick methods in composing in all its forms and how that indeed leads to generic, uninformed, unpracticed renderings that show the inadequacies of the artist or composer, as well as their “distrust of the creative process.” She commented on how the process of documentary making was like painting from the center of the canvas, working with what emerges through the exploration of footage. It was not plotted out on a storyboard, but rather evolved over time. In this sense, the students’ unwillingness to wade through the boringness of convention to find the emotional core of the story was in a sense “more conventional than what she was trying to teach,” which was to trust that the story would emerge through the footage and the characters. This process was a constant volley. While the teens wanted to make scraps out of footage instead of a conventional storyline, Simone pressed them to find the emotional core of their film and let it lead the story forward. She referred to this as “emotional direction,” as if fusing the structure with the emotive thrust of the story.

### **Bridging Tactical and Strategic Waters**

The territory between tactics and strategies on the plane of Discourse and rhetoric is the location where learning happened for the teens. Learning was a struggle. In response to their frustration over the boredom that infused their piece during their first round of editing, the students returned to deeply looking at their footage as per a suggestion from Simone. While at the time of my writing this paper, the teens’ documentary was not complete, I observed several shifts in the youths’ story structure which followed the advice of Simone. At the same time, I also noted that the teens retained strands of their own expression, but through a professionalized lens for audience consumption. This was not a matter of simplifying their storyline, but rather they complicated their piece in very productive and original ways. Taking Simone’s suggestion to find the emotional direction of their work, they moved from depicting Meals on Wheels as a system of meal production to illustrating Meals on Wheels as fulfilling a social need. This impacted the entire structural and emotional impact of the piece.

In going through their footage and interviewing the founder of Meals on Wheels before their second viewing of their edited work, the teens changed their strategy for tackling their documentary because of their growing understanding of the meaning of Meals on Wheels. At one time the teenagers joked that their core message was “Meals on

Wheels is good” and “Don’t hate,” but now their storyline touched a more serious and complicated edge, which Simone said made the young people “uncomfortable.” Simone explained that the students found out that, “seniors don’t eat because they are lonely, so what’s emerged is that the kids are no longer talking about systems.” In turn, this had a trickle-down effect with regard to how the teens structured their video. They had found its “emotional direction” through theme, not the process inherent to a system.

In talking with Simone about their edited work, the group determined that the shift from the story being about sequenced production to being about people necessitated a more complicated opening sequence. This was greatly encouraged by Simone. Instead of simply building a chronological structure based on the main interview of the piece, the teens took up the convention, which they once called “manufactured,” of placing interesting statements of unidentified characters up front, so as to hook the viewer. In their group critique of their second round of editing, these were referred to as “teasers” to “draw” the audience in, perhaps demonstrating their uptake of professionalized ways of thinking about their craft. Simone seemed to address their concern about being formulaic by reminding them of the good compositional structure that they learned in school. “Like in writing, we are setting up our problem. This will help rivet the audience. They will want to know what is going on.” Adia added, “Yeah, it is like having an antagonist.” Simone continued, “It is not sacrine...it’s authentic. It gives us a foe. Here’s what we are attacking.” Simone’s use of “us” and “we” seems to signal a collective strategy toward the problem at hand, bringing the youth into the new-found rephrasing of the problem, and by extension professionalization.

The group of teens responded well to this new-found direction, because they seemed to understand the value of their new footage. It was emotional, but they were not altogether sure how to handle the amount of sadness that was coming through in their footage. “We have this footage about how their family has moved away and how their friends are dying.” In response, Simone countered, “But this is what makes people go, Oooo, it’s drama.” Darbi was seeing the footage as an artifact of the situation, more than a piece that was in service to a story. In discussing how the Meals on Wheels founder cried on camera when discussing his mother, Darbi again reflected on the human behind the words as opposed to seeing the clip as in service to telling a story: “It is just so sad.” Again, Simone brought it back to the story, “He cried on camera for you. You have to use it.” This seemed to be a professionalized viewpoint which the youth were a little uncomfortable with, since they wanted to “respect their subjects” and not “embarrass them.” It seemed good that they would question whether or not showing someone else’s emotional side was good for the film or simply objectified the subject. But at the same time, they understood that it was an important event to show. Darbi reasoned, “Well, I figured that showing emotion is something

that would help the film, and also since it came so easily, he's probably an emotional guy, which is great, so it's something he would not be ashamed of, and I'm not really concerned about embarrassing him because we use only the best parts from his interview, and we have him laughing as well, so I think it works out." Darbi's explanation for using the footage is based in a broader context and is in service to the film. Additionally, the characterization was not one-dimensional, thus in Darbi's mind the act of crying was not an objectifying image of the interviewee.

They also worried that their storyline might be too depressing. In response, Simone suggested that the plot take "parallel action," in which two stories emerge at the same time. She qualified her statement that "you don't have to use it, but it is one technique." The parallel structure, according to Simone, would "mix the tones" of the documentary, perhaps even adding comic relief, thus accentuating the pathos of the film. Darbi engaged with her suggestion, asking if she meant they "intercut or overlap what the interviewees were saying with the action of the kitchen." The goal was to create two separate but emerging stories, according to Simone, "one consisting of the seniors and the other of the food...so you won't want to superimpose the narrative on top of the contrasting images." The effect would be emotional highs and lows. Darbi jokingly responded, "an emotional rollercoaster." The way in which he said this comment revealed sort of a half-in and half-out positionality, at once making light of the structure and complying with Simone's thought process. This perhaps revealed his transitioning but grounded perspective about using such a technique.

The youth were still a bit concerned with how the audience might respond to such a mixture of comedic and serious clips. For instance, while trying to figure out how to bring comedic elements into the storyline using a kitchen worker with a beard net, Simone informed the group that the image "allows people the permission to laugh," since it is gentle humor. Laughter was also planned in other ways by the youth. For instance, in one sequence they had several characters talking altruistically about their experience working for or volunteering for Meals on Wheels, but the last interviewee focused on the simple pleasures of having the Jell-o turn out correctly. At first they thought this was a defect in their footage since it might be read as making fun of the Jell-o maker. However, this was a different, more subtle humor than the youth had dealt with in the past; it built naturally through the interaction with the characters. Early in the documentary making process, the youth showed that they were well aware that this was the best way to build humor in a documentary. During one of my initial conversations with them, Ralph informed me that "Humor cannot be forced in documentary. It has to come from what you've filmed; otherwise it is contrived." Darbi agreed, saying that it was "tricky." Their statements are

revealing in comparison to the artificial effects that the group created for humorous means during their tactical poaching. Interestingly, however, they were a bit uncomfortable with this subtle humor, constantly questioning whether they were making fun of their subjects and if they “would make the audience uncomfortable,” as noted by Adia. Simone reassured them that, in the case of the worker who made Jell-o, people have different ways and reasons for getting involved in organizations and that “they were no less important than those who have seemingly big reasons for getting involved.” Consequently, the role of comedic relief not only acted to break sadness of loneliness, but also added an everyday “common man” element to the story’s structure which would help the audience relate to its meaning.

The above examples demonstrate the transitioning nature of the youths’ position toward their subject matter, the instructor, and their compositional processes. It represents a regrouping from the tactical moves they made against the discourse of documentary and the professionalized pedagogies of the instructor, who tried to lead the youth into understanding the language of film. The tone of their statements and collaborative nature of their comments with Simone suggest a willingness to engage in her professionalized thought patterns. In my last interview with the group, however, I still sensed a bit of resistance to Simone’s strategies for bringing the youth into documentary Discourse. Adia said, “Sometimes I think it is kind of silly though, because it could sort of be like a power struggle, because we sort of just want to do our own thing, and she will say something, and I will automatically say to myself, ‘that’s a stupid idea.’ And I will think about it as she is talking and I will think that’s a good idea.” The others laughed in agreement. Darbi followed, “Yeah, I find that when she first starts her critiques I am really irritated, and then I think about them and I say that it makes sense.” When pressed about this feeling, Adia commented, “It is like when your ideas feel threatened because you have one way of looking at it.” Then Ralph added, “It is like when you have this one view but it is really uneducated. You can be a skeptic of what is being said, but it is pretty hard to be a skeptic when...” Adia interrupts, “when you don’t have any experience. It is a little bit twisted.” These comments illustrate that the youth are aware of their reactions to Simone’s comments as they struggle with a new language. Yet, they also position themselves as uneducated and filled with misconceptions about how to construct meaning through video. Yet, as many of the examples demonstrate, they do have a set of prior knowledge about what makes good documentary—not forcing humor, teaser dialogue, and the value of B-role in conveying meaning, to name a few—but they seem to devalue their own amateur understanding and tactics in favor of the strategies of professionalized Discourse. Indeed, they do not think of themselves as documentary makers.

## Discussion

As many researchers who work within professionalized pedagogies such as apprenticeship have demonstrated, teaching students to cognitively approach a problem, as professionals would in the field, has its benefits. Youth come closer to understanding academic practices in real world contexts, engaging in critical thinking as opposed to textbook answers. However, the tensions that the learner feels within these spaces are not well documented. While some researchers have briefly noted the expressive struggles youth undergo as they work with adults to learn a trade and craft a final product (Chavéz and Soep 2003), little has been written about how the youth negotiate this terrain, tracking their products as they gain professionalized feedback and acculturation within domains associated with New Literacies. Additionally, little has been written on how instructors try to shape youth thinking and expressive moves by calling on conventions both within and between new and traditional modes of literacy or how this particular type of pedagogy plays out in a less-formal setting.

In this study, I have attempted to track this process as youth work with a professionalized sponsor while engaging in a New Literacy practice within a less-formalized educational setting. The students grappled with a new language (film), a new genre, a new way of seeing, and a new technology. The sponsor acted as a guide through this landscape, carrying a bag of traditional Discourse practices that “have held the field of film together for decades,” according to Simone, the youths’ instructor. As has been illustrated through my findings, the youth already had many of these conventions in mind as consumers of media, but the process of composing shifted the dynamic from being consumers to being producers of messages, putting them in the driver’s seat. And like anyone with a new technology, who wouldn’t want to play and experiment with the medium to understand its rules and violations? This experimentation, however, ran deeper than just learning the technology; it also involved conventions of Discourse. Consequently, the literacy sponsor began to instill the meaning-making practices of the trade through strategies of compliance, only to be met with resistance (or tactics) by the youth. The compositional process was a struggle of expression and ownership of this expression.

Why is it important to study the struggle and resistance of the youth, as well as the instructor? The illustration and visible negotiation of this process presented in this study has some implications for educational practices, especially as the use of New Literacies—such as documentary and video making—potentially grow in schools, either as a part of electives or as alternatives to traditional literacy in classrooms. Although full integration of New Literacies into traditional classroom practices seems like a far-off dream to some and futuristic folly to others, the grounded early adopters of alternative forms of expressions show how hybrid educational environments

(e.g., service learning at a community center) act as serious academic venues in which youth become highly invested in their work, even despite the frustrations associated with learning the tools and language of a new form of expression. The youth in this study were highly motivated to finish their project despite their aggravations, and they were highly committed to representing their subject matter with sensitivity. The endeavor was not simply an assignment to be completed for a grade or proof of competence, but it was an assignment in which they had to figure out the core meaning of a story and sincerely represent those who appeared in it to a truly authentic audience. This process took unlearning certain knowledge and skills taught as codified and unbreakable rules and conventions in schools—such as the chronology. It is somewhat easy to understand why resistance ensued when they had to take a risk to break conventions of one medium in lieu of the adoption of another set of conventions from another medium. Perhaps this is a part of the process of “redesign” as noted by the New London Group (23). In the tensions that are caused by working between mediums, youth and teachers can find moments of transliteracy illumination through contrasts of composing strategies and compositional form.

In this study, students often did not understand the source of their resistance to learning, which was embodied by Simone, as the professional documentary maker who was trying to bring them into the craft of a new medium. During the final interview, they wondered if what they were going through was natural and happened to other people. The answer was “yes” and that as we become increasingly invested in our compositions, it becomes harder to divorce one’s self from one’s work. Although Chavéz and Soep have noted similar student resistance, their analysis was closely tethered to the text and its negotiation, and it did not seem as personally charged as in the current case. This is perhaps because the researchers framed their study around pedagogies of collegiality. In my study based on de Certeau’s theory, the moments of resistance seemed to build once the creative endeavor was launched during the taking of video and built toward a crescendo during editing, a time of high feedback from the instructor. The tensions circled around who controlled expression, and the youth were at odds with both the instructor and struggling with the filmic language.

The instructor did not understand the source of resistance and determined that the youths’ behaviors were generalized teenage rebellion. While this might partly be true, it is also likely that the youth were concerned about owning their work and seriously wrestling with an unfamiliar expressive medium. Consequently, I pose whether it might be best to productively call out these tensions as part of the feedback process, perhaps as something to address while teaching studio-pedagogies, collegiality, and the culture of critique. As teachers begin experimenting with New Literacies and as instructors from professions begin working with

youth who may not have the desire to understand the professional nuances of a craft, it may be useful for both sets of educators to understand the dynamics of teaching alternative literacies that involve not only creativity but also sets of expectations and conventions. By doing so, we may come up with a balanced way of thinking about pedagogies associated with teaching New Literacies.

## Endnotes

1. The Northwest Film Center explicitly asked that I mention its name when presenting my findings.

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