Multimedia Assignment Motivates Student to Succeed

Steven Dale, a bright but unmotivated student, was quietly singing a rap tune when he overheard his teacher mention something about a multimedia assignment. This caught his attention and he tuned back in to discover that she wanted the students to create videos about historical events or heroes. Dale immediately thought about the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, as that was a topic of interest to him.

The high school junior from Moss Point, Mississippi, enthusiastically began researching the Japanese-American internment for this project, using Internet search engines to locate images, books, and articles. Weeks later, he had assembled a video collage set to “Kenji,” a rap song written and performed by Mike Shinoda, a member of the bands Fort Minor and Linkin Park. The song is about the confinement of Shinoda’s grandfather at the Japanese-American internment camp in Manzanar, California.

“I was really excited to do a project featuring Shinoda’s music,” says Dale. “And the topic was relevant to what was happening at the time. Shortly after the Iraq war started, I heard stories about Americans of Arabic descent being stopped and searched in airports, and ignorant people saying we should just blow them all up,” he explains. “My girlfriend is Mexican, and the majority of the students in my school are African-American. So these recent events both seemed very relevant and bothered me, and helped me relate to the plight of Japanese-Americans during the war.”

Dale could not have predicted the effect this assignment would have on him, or how much the project would change his views on learning.

Less than a year earlier, Dale was considered a bright student who was not very interested in what Moss Point High School had to offer, according to Elicha Miles, the teacher who assigned the video project. But after he joined the technology team, which Miles coordinates, and was able to use technology to do his schoolwork, he became much more motivated and engaged. “Steven was one of the first people at Moss Point to obtain the IC3 certification [a digital literacy requirement for Mississippi teachers], and he was a student!” says Miles. “Today, he is an ambitious, goal-oriented high school graduate who already has his own business and has plans to continue his education. The change has been dramatic.”

The technology team that Dale belonged to is a group of students who are familiar with computers and software programs and use this knowledge to assist teachers with class projects involving technology. The group was formed last year as part of the Cisco® 21st Century Schools Initiative (21S), which works with school districts to transform learning and improve student outcomes. The technology team was established not only to engage students like Dale, but also to accelerate learning transformation by encouraging teachers to use and adopt new technologies.
Transforming Learning, Delivering Hope

The video project that Miles assigned demonstrates how technology can be used to support project-based, multidisciplinary learning. It involved history, language arts, art, and music, as well as information and communication technology skills.

As inspired as Dale was by the nature of the assignment, he was equally awed by the experience of using technology to do his research and execute the project. “In the past, research involved mostly books, newspapers, and magazines, so we’d have to go to the library to find the materials we needed. Internet technology is instantaneous and flexible. You can conduct your research in the way that works for you, any time of day,” explains Dale.

Putting It All Together

After completing his research, Dale began editing the images he wanted to include in his video, using image-editing software to add drop shadows and other effects to make them come alive. When he was satisfied with the results, he assembled the video using video-editing software. He chose a blue and gray color theme to complement the black-and-white photos, with an occasional bit of red to represent the blood spilled in the war.

The project was not without its challenges—Dale had to overcome many obstacles to obtain primary source content and learn advanced features of the video editing programs he was using. But he persevered, and at various stages of the project, he tested the video on some of his classmates.

“I’d find students who looked like they were having a good time and ask them to watch the video in a place where there were no distractions to see what kind of effect it had on them,” he recalls. “If their eyes got a little watery, I knew I’d been successful. If not, I went back to the drawing board.”

A Different Kind of Learning

When Dale’s Kenji video was finally complete, he presented it to the class and posted it on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=eE58YHtS_). To his amazement, other teachers at Moss Point High asked him to present the video in their classrooms. A short time later, he learned that thousands of people were viewing it on YouTube, and that Mike Shinoda himself liked the clip so much that he featured it on his website.

The project helped Dale realize that integrating technology into learning made education a lot more fun. “I came away from this project believing that school doesn’t have to be about answering questions 1 through 10 on page 374. I mean, I got so involved in it, the next thing I knew, I was going into classrooms and showing it to other students, teaching them what I knew about the topic, and ultimately getting recognition from a global audience,” he says. “This kind of learning is much more interesting to me.”

Since the release of the video, Dale has graduated from high school and created a production company called Broken Carrot Productions. He is working with Northern Kentucky University to develop a documentary about Moss Point, and with South Shore Productions to develop a post-Katrina documentary. Dale plans to go to college to study computer networking and to further develop his videography and production skills.

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