Concluding Performance

'The celebration of new insights and understandings at the end of a Quest.'

Green Screen

Introduction

The new insights and understandings gained during a Quest often lend themselves to some form of dramatic performance. For Quests such as 'Lest We Forget' and 'Aye Aye Captain!' we have developed a small costume wardrobe so collaborative pairs can role play as a way of sharing their new understandings. Using green screen technology it is possible to place the students in settings separated in time and space. Two soldiers can be discussing the important things to be remembered about war in the trenches of the Western Front. Two sailors can be discussing the attributes of the Captains James Cook and William Bligh outside an 18th Century stone cottage.

Producing a video of their concluding performance that can be taken home on a CD is a high stakes performance that raises the students' efforts. Present technology places limits on the performance. Time constraints and our classroom computers ability to handle large video files and a CDs storage capacity limits individual performances to around a minute. The discipline of condensing the new insights and understandings to a one minute conversation turns the time problem into a significant advantage. The students must be focused and thoughtful. It is surprising how much can be said in one minute!

Green Screen Technology

Basically, in this technique a subject is shot in front of a green or blue screen, which the computer the makes transparent and replaces with a different background. A good example is the television weather reports. Blue screen was originally invented as a film technique. Blue was originally used because it is the one colour which does not exist in skin tone. Skin tone is made of a combination of red and green. Using film you must use a blue screen. The best choice with video however is green. Green items of clothing are rarer than blue and if sunlight falls on your subject its blue light content will cause problems. A green screen also has the advantage of generally needing less light to light it evenly. The screen we have purchased is a true chromakey green screen, dyed before the fabric was woven and is colourfast. It is important that the screen is absolutely uniform in colour and shade. It is important that the subject contains as little of the screen colour as possible. Also, make sure that the subject is not too close to the background as shadows disturb its uniform colour. Try and keep the camera as far away or preferably farther from the subject than the subject is from the screen, use the zoom feature for composition. Try not to shoot at extreme angles to the screen. Think of 90o as perfect and anything else as a compromise. This has to do with keeping an even light on the screen.

The video clips need to be the same length. Edit each to 1 minute. The foreground is placed before the background then the green screen effect is applied.

Even lighting of the green screen is recommended but is not critical. This background would be better if it had less folds with dark shadows.

The final movie is exported to Quicktime in CD ROM format then copied to a CD so it can be taken home.

'Lest We Forget' Filming

Student Preparation

We immerse the class in peoples' personal experiences of war – by hearing soldiers/nurses speaking of their personal experiences in war, and by reading about peoples' experiences – war letters, diaries, war poetry (poetry is especially powerful) etc. Most students had some family connection to war through grandparents etc – we encouraged them to discuss their memories. The children enjoyed sharing their family experiences and it really reinforced the validity of the scenario. The quality of the script will depend on the quality of the work they do in the Quest – this enables the students to feel confident about what they are being asked to do.

Prior to writing the actual script we had the children practice writing in a war context but in different ways, e.g. write a letter home from the trenches describing battle conditions, feelings, experiences etc, write war cinquains or similar about a particular aspect of war. We focused feedback on their use of descriptive language, ability to describe feelings and events vividly, use of effective dialogue etc.

Co-operative pairs then spend a short time outlining and planning the scenario for their script. They need to identify their roles and the main 'theme' that their script will follow, based on the ideas that they wish to convey, or the personal experiences of a particular soldier/nurse that they wish to incorporate.

Students need to be clear about the parameters of the script, e.g. length, any compulsory content, type of backdrop that will be used (in order to match their script to it), seated position for filming etc.

Allow sufficient time for script writing – students will initially write too much. They need to be continually re-focused on keeping to the message of what should be remembered about war, without straying into excessive dialogue and detail.

Sufficient time for rehearsal is also important as what is initially just 'words' suddenly becomes much more real, and the students begin to actively reflect on what they have written, and edit themselves and each other on the 'realism' of their dialogue.

Technical Preparation

You need a green screen, digital video camera, tripod, computer with at least 8GB of free disk space and plenty of RAM (700MB+), iMovie with green screen plugin, data projector and costumes.

Filming the background video sequence can be done using a still photo projected through a data projector. Things to consider:

No people in the background shot. It looks strange if they are frozen to the spot. Don't cut it too fine, the view through the view finder is not accurate. If you are too close to the edges unwanted things may appear on the video.
When projecting from your computer through a data projector watch where you leave the cursor.

The lighting usually needs to be similar to the foreground footage if it is going to look realistic.

Costumes and Props

Very important in adding to the drama and increasing authenticity.
Time consuming however – students need assistance with getting into costume. In general each pair took about 15 minutes to change.
Parents can be a good resource for extras, e.g. bandages.

Filming

Selection of students to be the camera operators is critical. They are not just pointing the camera, but setting up the backdrops and taking them down again, helping the actors into their costumes, giving feedback and direction about voice inflection, body language etc, encouraging and motivating actors to 'perform', being bossy about students having excessive takes, and keeping the pairs to a filming schedule. The teacher is managing their classroom, and while available, is not supervising the filming in person.

This is quite a demanding job, use these students to teach other able students the process, thus having a pool of trained students who could spread the workload amongst themselves.

Students can be very confident and word-perfect in their scripts during rehearsal and then freeze in front of the camera. Having their scripts enlarged and put on the wall out of sight of the camera gives them a little extra support.

30 minutes per pair should be plenty of time to change into costume and film the sequence. Two to three pairs per block, six to eight per day.

The camera tapes need to be in good condition as the sound quality deteriorates rapidly.

We used an external microphone plugged into the video camera not the camera's built in microphone.

Nearby classrooms need to assist with keeping noise levels down around the location of filming.